Including Everyone:

Ensuring Neighborhood Organizations
Represent the Neighborhood

Commissioned by

The McKnight Neighborhood Self-Help
Initiatives Program (MNSHIP)

and

The Minneapolis Foundation

by Grace Jordan McGinniss and Steven Gray

Including Everyone:

Ensuring Neighborhood Organizations Represent the Neighborhood

Introduction

Since 1981 the Minneapolis Foundation, under a 10-year grant from the McKnight Foundation, has been encouraging the development of local initiative, self-help neighborhood groups. The McKnight Neighborhood Self-Help Initiatives Program (MNSHIP) is now in its sixth operational year.

An evaluation of MNSHIP's progress conducted in 1986 identified underrepresentation of key neighborhood populations as the number one problem facing MNSHIP-funded organizations. Renters, ethic minorities, senior citizens, and youth were identified as those least likely to be involved in decision-making at a neighborhood level.

To help neighborhood groups better understand the issue of underrepresentation and provoke discussion and action in this area, the MNSHIP Advisory Committee commissioned Rainbow Research, Inc. to prepare a paper to facilitate and frame discussion of the topic.

Underrepresentation is an issue in which experience is the best insurance for productive and realistic discussion. Since Rainbow Research wished to reflect the views of leading neighborhood and community practitioners, 14 hours of interviews with 19 local and national practitioners were held. The calling list began with local names suggested by the MNSHIP Advisory Committee and with

other, national, sources. In a number of instances, conversations led to referral to additional sources. The practitioners whose reflections contributed to the building of this discussion paper are listed at the conclusion.

The practitioners were asked to comment on what their experience of "underrepresentation" has been and what advice they would give to neighborhood leadership and staff who were trying to address the "problem." This paper is a synthesis of the cumulative responses.

The response from the field

The practitioners know the "trenches" well. Their advice exhibited an awareness of the constant struggle organizations have just to survive and to keep up with the changes brought about by international, national, regional and even city decisions beyond the reach of their influence.

Their stance was positive but did not preclude a rugged kind of honesty as illustrated in the following encouragement offered:

> "Underrepresentation has always been a problem. It just wasn't seen or admitted. But now it's worse. Prosperity is gone and there is a serious temptation to blame the victims."

> "Sometimes it's tough to see beyond the victim to the real causes of problems."

> "Underrepresentation is a challenge, not a reason for discouragement."

> "Even talking about underrepresentation is an action that will influence the community and make change."

> "Tell them it's a strength to be asking what to do about it. They are not alone."

The underrepresentation of some local populations in neighborhood organizations can be fully discussed only within a context of change. Addressing underrepresentation suggests that the neighborhood group is willing to entertain the idea of change:

1. Change in how it will conduct itself;

---

2. Change in the experience which current members will have; and

3. Change in the issues with which the organization concerns itself.

It is also recognized that acting on the problem could shift relationships with other organizations, including funding sources.

From an organizing point of view many changes originating from outside neighborhood boundaries have significance, including: government retrenchment, shifts in the country's industrial base and class structure, migration of people, gentrification, "white flight," and the new tax laws.

So much of good organizing and leadership is the ability to *understand* and *apply* principles, rather than the repetition of others' methods and models. It is clear that the underrepresentation question is so multi-faceted and rampant that relying on others' precedents and models won't do. They don't exist yet and because change happens at such an accelerated rate, the models could well be obsolete before they could be copied.

The substance of good leadership and good community organizing has always been helping each other live hopefully. But, there is a paradox here — the paradox is that of having to acknowledge the large problems unflinchingly and at the same time maintain respect for the seemingly small and temporary victories that we *can* manage.

So, what is as small organization to do? It does what is available to it to do. It begins small and manageable and goes step by step. The first step may have to be examining assumptions about the words used in the discussion itself. Words can be barriers to clarity.

Three key words

We will examine a few key terms before going further. For the purposes of this paper, three deserve special scrutiny: "stake," "representation," and "hospitality."

What does "stake" in a neighborhood mean? What does "stake" in an organization mean? Webster defines stake as "an interest or share in an undertaking." To look at most neighborhood organizations and who participates in them, one could conclude that those with the greatest stake in the neighborhood were the property owners.

Every organization should ask "What is the relationship of property owners to the neighborhood organization?" What if the notion of "property" were widened to include a "sense of place" as the drive behind "stake" in the well-being of a neighborhood? After all, the drama of each person's story, memories, and relationship to the physical world is written "in some place."

For many of the new people in city neighborhoods, the memory of other, perhaps never to be seen again places hovers over their present place. Would not an interpretation of "place" as "stake" at least receive recognition as a possibility from them? Indeed seniors understand well the role of "places past" in life.

How can neighborhood organizations put more emphasis on "place" as "stake," especially across cultural, ethnic, age, income, and lifestyle differences? These are not soft or sentimental questions. They have powerful organizational self-interest implications. Similarly, what does "representation" mean? Webster says that representation is "the body of persons representing a constituency." Unnecessary confusion is caused by likening representation in neighborhood organizations to the proportional representation of electoral politics. Citizen organizing doesn't require more than 1% or 2% of the purported constituency to achieve legitimacy and effectiveness.

Are neighbors separated from each other and from the possibility of effective self-help action by a tendency to think in terms of categories rather than of persons? Do we know enough about each other to see faces behind statistics and distinctions within categories?

The bottom line in citizen organization is the ability to win and sustain recognition at the bargaining table. There is only one route to that table: the ability to deliver substantial numbers of people when necessary.

The checks and balances in citizen organization lie in how "representative" of a constituency its issues are as much as in the numbers it claims for members. When an issue breaks in the public arena, a citizen organization should have framed it in such a way that the public it will affect say to themselves: "Yes, that's right. It's about time someone did something."

There is pressure on our words and definitions when the interests of constituencies within neighborhoods conflict. The growing problem of homeless people, some set to wandering through the "liberation" of deinstitutionalization, others deprived of shelter by the destruction of single room occupancy housing for downtown development, is an example of such pressure mentioned by more than one practitioner. Struggling neighborhoods close to downtowns seem increasingly forced to be against the powerless because they want to protect the quality of their neighborhood "place."

One word deserves special attention because it can provide a simple and practical framework for working on the underrepresentation issue. That word is "hospitality."

Again, referring to Webster, hospitality is defined as "the act or practice of offering a pleasant of sustaining environment." In order to be serviceable as a word for dealing with underrepresentation, "hospitality" has to be rescued from any tinge of sentimentality.

To address underrepresentation, organizations must make some decisions about hospitality and be willing to make some organizational changes.

Three areas of organizational decision emerged from interviews with practitioners:

1. Examining the messages the organization sends to the neighborhood;

2. Deciding to change;

3. Rethinking assumptions about constituencies, resources, and issues.

Examining the messages the organization sends to the neighborhood

Organizational self-scrutiny was a strong part of the message the practitioners contributed to the discussion. The following quotes indicate how the hospitality theme touched the organizational questions:

"We have to be honest with ourselves. Look at ourselves first."

"What is our style as an organization?"

"Do we have organizational habits that shout: 'Change not welcome here. Stay away?' Or, if not 'stay away,' then 'please come and do what we do and care about what we care about?"

"When we acknowledge that the organization doesn't include representation from every group that has moved into the neighborhood, what reasons do we give? When we think about them, do we think about categories or do we think about people?"

"What do we mean by neighborhood? Are we talking geography only? What do we gain if we push problems on to the next neighborhood over?"

"What changes have happened inside the organization that haven't been noticed because they were gradual? For example, families grow and kids get older. Issues and interests change. How does that influence the organization?"

"Forget about underrepresentation for a minute. What do we mean by represent?"

"Does who pays staff salary make a difference?"

"What's real representation? How many people you can consistently get out to an action?"

Organizing has always been an act of hospitality. The secret to organizing is arranging to be invited in to organize. And the path to leadership in the emerging organization is the willingness to turn, to listen and welcome others by sitting at their kitchen tables.

This kind of hospitality is distinguished from "entertaining." It is the difference between being invited to sit at the kitchen table and being one of 50 other people in a hired party room. One has to know who one is and who the guest is in order to offer (or accept) kitchen table hospitality.

The organizer moves purposefully from kitchen table to kitchen table. Introduced to each in turn by others. Listening. Listening for the issues. Listening for the informal and natural leaders. The point of it all is the building of an effective vehicle to carry tough issues up against entrenched and well-endowed powers.

The dream and possibility of changing things for the better through organization are imaged at the individual kitchen tables and they take on the energy of life at the first planning meeting. That is the guts of organizing. In the earliest days, staff usually leads the way. But if leadership is not soon also moving from kitchen table to kitchen table, something is amiss. As organizations grow in experience and victories, key leadership and staff work as a team.

What attracts and then continues to hold the attention of volunteer neighborhood talent is the experience and assurance of being listened to. It is an experience of hospitality, of being welcomed and being invited to help build a "place" where the power to be effective is possible. Behind every formal meeting in a park board building or church basement, some degree of personal, hospitable encounter has to have taken place.

It is exactly this that organizers and leaders weary of. It is as if their capacity for the small, personal organizational moment is strained. As one of the practitioners

noted, "We forget that the people haven't been down this road before even though we have done it many times."

Some leaders and organizers are more comfortable one-on-one at kitchen tables. Others thrive on the rough and tumble of the issue arena and the big meeting. Effective community organizing requires the blending of both capacities in the same staff and leaders. Sometime, if the organization is strong and big enough, the tasks can be spread around, but everyone who would lead or staff should be willing to do the task. Organizing requires the unsentimental blending of a deeply committed personal hospitality with organizational hospitality.

The task has never been easy. For every ten kitchen table conversations one accepts that seven will say "No thank you anyway." One learns to concentrate on the three who say "Yes." The great comfort of organization builders is: "Oh well, if it were easy, someone else would have done it."

Historically, hospitality and organizing have gone together. Many powerful grassroots organizations have been launched from kitchen table in the neighborhoods of this country. It was not thought of particularly as hospitality. The access and implied familiarity usually came with the neighborhood. Things may be different now. Perhaps now the task is to figure out how to do consciously what used to be done by instinct.

The notion of hospitality is usually interpreted as welcoming people "in." What can escape attention is that the invitation to build together can also mean stepping out into a new place. Minority people among our practitioners told us in effect: "Just because we are not in their organizations doesn't mean we are not organized." The same feeling holds true for organizations which are grassroots but not specific to certain neighborhoods who ask what relation "stake" in a particular neighborhood has to issues common to several neighborhoods.

The key is listening closely to both the messages that the organization projects and what residents of the neighborhood are concerned about. It is difficult to assume anything on the basis of categories of people. The pressures of everyday life survival are very different for every group of people and for individuals within groups.

Deciding to change

How might an attitude of hospitality influence an organizational approach to the underrepresentation problem?

Depending on circumstances, on organization could take two possible complementary approaches. One approach would look to the organization as it exists and ask what it would have to do to become a welcoming place. The other approach would involve stepping out from home base to join with others in building a new place to which all bring what they are but which remains different from home base.

In either case, the basic invitation would be to build together a place where diverse groups and individuals from within "categories" might cross barriers and talk to each other as persons.

The first direction would be most helpful when an organization chooses to focus on welcoming individuals rather than members or organized groups. The second direction would be helpful in welcoming cultural and ethnic minorities who already have strong group affiliations, but may have difficulty appreciating what a neighborhood organization is, much less what it can do for them.

One leader from refugee community told us: "In electoral situations, the majority rules. The minority has to help itself. We know we will always be minority. Things may change later, after we are sure of survival. But that is how it is now."

Perhaps better communication would assist this leader in distinguishing between electoral politics and the possibilities of a well-organized group of neighborhood people.

Perceptions about organizations and how they work would have to broaden. Activities which used to be considered peripheral to "real" action organizing would become more central. The new place would be a place of communication, but it would not be a place dominated by Robert's Rules of Order.

Activities would be designed to encourage listening to others for hints about their lives, for discovering similarities, and for stimulation in difference. The vehicles of communication would often include music, food, theater, art, and story telling. In short, the task of the new place would be to find ways as a neighborhood to comprehend each other as personas and as groups. The only goal would be to extend a mutual hospitality which can leap barriers as prelude to the trust necessary for identifying and moving together on issues.

A hospitable attitude does not imply an organizational sentimentality or softness which would neglect the organization's best interests. Rather, an attitude of hospitality is in the best practical interests of the organization.

Actually, an organization has a duty to structure itself in ways that insure sensible, effective and hospitable decision-making. One particular insurance which is important is prevention of the organization's being rushed to decision without preparation. Many organizations avoid this by setting a rule of not accepting organizational commitment to an action or issue unless there is leadership able to produce a working constituency for the issue and a well thought-out plan for proceeding.

It is also important for an organization to expect accountability and reciprocity from those who participate in its benefits. More than one practitioner mentioned the problem of winning victories for residents who feel no responsibility to the organization. As one respondent said: "Neighborhood organizations are not social service agencies." And another: "Empowerment isn't something that can be given, it has to worked for."

Examining assumptions about
constituencies, issues, and resources

If there was one clear message from the practitioners, it was that times and realities of the American neighborhood are changing. The message was that neighborhood organizations ought to know and be on speaking terms with the pluralities in their neighborhoods. Otherwise outsiders who have no communal stake or story in the neighborhood will continue to play off one against the other.

There was an urgency in much of their comment:

> "Close-in neighborhoods are paying the price for downtown development, Federal decisions, health care decisions. Before we knew it, the detox centers and the homeless became issues in one of our neighborhoods. Victims are set against victims. We managed to shift the issue from the people to the policies of the package stores in the area and to the way the shelter runs its operations. But it isn't easy."

> "Neighborhoods are carrying the burden for school system chaos, for the real estate industry, and for highways that take care of the suburbs. The

targets are far away. It's difficult especially for a small organization. Wars half way around the world affect our neighborhoods."

"Now, with money scarce, Community Development Corporations are going to be looking for more solid neighborhood bases. But there's the problem of specialization. People's lives are busy. It's hard for them to get interested in the technicalities of development work. They either don't see the development projects as benefiting them or they think projects dominate the organization and other things can't get done. And a different type of staff person is attracted to development work. They don't always have the patience for development of people."

The task of neighborhood organizations today seems to be communicating across barriers of pluralism, as members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and social groups maintain their own distinct cultures or special interests. One could argue that neighborhoods had better take the initiative because no one else in the society seems to be doing it.

The underrepresented

Pluralism in our city neighborhoods is not just ethnic and cultural. It is also economic. Landlords, home owners, renters, young, old, and distinct cultural minorities could be described as varieties of pluralism.

Renters, youth and seniors are not self-conscious groups sticking together for identity and survival. In their cases separateness is more a case of ageism and economic disparity. But it is important to look behind the categories. Not all renters are poor. Not all elderly play cards. Not all youth are peer group dominated.

While approaching individuals should be the mainstay of an organizing effort, it is also a good practice to approach people through groups even if the groups have to be organized first. Often specially organized, informal groups become key parts of an organization. Informal groups can become vehicles for leadership experience of previously unrecognized local leaders. The existence of interest groups adds to the organization's potential for well-rounded insight into the issues behind "categories."

Renters

As one practitioner asked earlier, "Do we see people as categories or do we see them as people?" This loaded question suits well the problem of underrepresentation of renters in neighborhood organizations.

Thinking about "renters" is an odd exercise. One would bet that not many "renters" define themselves as renters except in relation to their landlord or their rent check. What paying that rent check might symbolize for each renter can vary.

A respondent laid the renter puzzle out with a clarity born of experience:

> "Know what the statistics mean. Know what they mean for your neighborhood and for the surrounding area. It is not enough to know that there are X% of renters. You have to know what sort of renters they are and what sort of housing they rent."

> "A neighborhood may have a high proportion of renters but when you investigate you may find they are all concentrated in a few buildings that cater to young, mobile singles who rent efficiency apartments for a short time and then move on. You have to know whether the renters live in high rises, walk-ups, duplexes; whether they live in owner-occupied housing. Perhaps the first distinction to make is that between long and short term renters."

Even with a good knowledge of the rental situation in one's area there can be puzzles. One person reported a neighborhood organization coming to the defense of long-term renters who were being forced-out by developers. The organizations took on the issue and won about $1500 relocation money for the people being displaced. However, the fact that these people had lived in the neighborhood a long time, had been given opportunity to join the organization and had not, was not lost on the membership.

The most obvious recruitment problem even with long term renters is the problem of defining or identifying their "stake" in the neighborhood. Safety, crime, clean streets and yards, fresh and fairly priced food in local stores, not having porn shops or massage parlors around, were suggested as the issues which would draw long-term renters.

Another obvious distinction which can be easily overlooked if we are thinking of categories rather than people, is the distinguishing or "renters" by the amount of rent they pay and the concomitant amenities of their lifestyle. Where the renters

and elderly category overlap, distinction should be made between rent-subsidized high-rise seniors, home-owning seniors, and retired apartment-dwelling seniors.

The most consistent advice in regard to renters, aside from knowing who the statistics are describing, seemed to focus on individual buildings rather than on people. If a property-focused approach is taken in analyzing underrepresentation of renters, economic differences between renters would be less significant than ownership.

If a building isn't too terrific and its the landlord's fault, then an organization can help the renters in the building get themselves together to take on the landlord. This doesn't solve the problem renters' subsequent feeling of "stake" in the organization or neighborhood, but protecting housing stock does provide a juncture at which renters' and property owners' interests coincide.

One neighborhood group reported having initiated, raised money for, and seen through a major rehab of an apartment building. They have yet to see one of the renter beneficiaries of that effort at their meetings.

Another organization reported protecting the property and quality of life (their terms) of their neighborhood by providing management services for local buildings owned by absent landlords. They charge only expenses. In return they have an agreement for screening prospective tenants. Their agreement also includes first option to buy should the building be put on the market.

One very interesting suggestion from a person who is expert on the tenant side of issues was for neighborhood organizations to establish a policy that in their neighborhood, landlords must negotiate with tenants. The organization would target buildings, find out whether there were tenants' issues, whether or not the landlord is being fair, identify and organize tenant leadership and prepare them for negotiation.

Since neighborhood organizations often have landlord membership it might be too much to expect the organization to facilitate the negotiations between the landlord and tenants. One suggestion is that a caucus of landlords who either live in their buildings or in the neighborhoods could be a core leadership to implement the policy. They would seem to have some interest in not allowing absentee, speculative building owners to compromise the neighborhood.

Recruiting a third, neutral, locally respected organization to facilitate landlord-tenant negotiations would also be a way to reorganize the use of talent and resources within neighborhoods.

Of course, the problem of the tenants feeling a stake in the neighborhood would remain. However, if the organization targeted buildings which were also an

eyesore for the neighborhood and fix-up resulted, then perhaps there would be payoff.

Implementing any systematic approach to representation of renters requires a core group of people willing to undertake a kitchen table survey which is couched in terms of hospitality and follow-up activities designed into the effort. Don't assume that people who rent want to come to a meeting about renters' rights.

Youth and Seniors

In terms of their underrepresentation in neighborhood organizations, youth and seniors are categories which have something in common: attitudes toward them are influenced by ageism. Often, it is assumed that a lot is known about them but both groups are, in many ways, faceless to neighborhood organizations.

In the case of seniors, their abilities and experiences are often underestimated. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that, in the eyes of younger people, seniors tend to look progressively more alike as they grow older. (If we pause to consider this, it becomes evident that there is a correlation between seeing people as categories rather than as persons, and underrepresentation.)

Seniors' stage in life provides another factor. The crowning of life involves what someone recently called a progressive series of losses. One practical result of loss is that the ordinary evidence by which people are judged no longer surrounds many seniors. If people are not interest enough to ask, they won't find out who the person is and what they can do for the organization because the evidence is no longer obvious.

Underrating seniors as an organization resource is very common. One advantage to having some people around who know something about "loss" is that they often have a good sense of what is worth getting excited about and what is not.

Youth are victims of ageism too. Generally speaking, people are afraid of them in groups hanging around the neighborhood. For most neighborhood organizations, one gathers that underrepresentation isn't the correct term at all. Youth are seldom even considered.

There is a stereotype that involving youth in an organization requires basketball courts and recreation programs. Those activities are not usually the function of

neighborhood organizations so recruitment of youth as members is not a strong item. What would an organization do with them?

Several organizations reported doing the only sensible thing. They actually asked local youths and local seniors how the organization could be of service and what they could do for the organization. An interesting meshing of resources and needs emerged in ways that come close to looking like workable models for replication. The following is a composite.

They found out that local youth want:

- to earn money;

- to belong;

- to take responsibility where their effort is recognized;

- to build job references;

- to pick-up work on schedules that allow them time for other jobs, for school, and for sports; and

- to not pay taxes on earnings if possible.

At the same time, senior homeowners, condominium dwellers, and duplex tenants need:

- low cost, dependable help with outside and inside home repairs and chores;

- help shopping;

- house cleaning; and sometimes,

- meal preparation.

Often, neither youth nor seniors want to operate in the open market. For youth, they are either too young, have schedules that don't allow other jobs, or want to avoid taxes. Many seniors cannot afford adult scale wages, feel uncomfortable having to screen and hire strangers, want to know they are not being cheated and that their house isn't being cased.

Several groups put these two sets of needs together. Typically, the organizations use senior volunteers to train youth in the most common jobs around the house such as yard work, snow removal, painting, window repair, screen repair, etc.

Typically, an organization recruits, screens, hires (often brokers the money exchange), keeps records on quality of work and on complaints from both sides. The arrangement can be offered as a service to the community or as a benefit of membership.

Having some nominal arrangement obviously provides opportunity for building the organization, e.g., seniors who receive benefits serve as volunteers in managing the program. Youth workers who receive commendation points are honored at recognition ceremonies. A core of youth can work with seniors on managing and setting policy. This activity provides early experience of business management, setting performance standards, and peer review.

Another way of reorganizing existing resources using the youth/senior combination helps youth to improve their reading, writing and reasoning skills by training them to do oral histories of seniors in the neighborhood. The use of electronic equipment which can then be transcribed at their own pace in private can help develop critical skills while participating in building a history of the neighborhood.

Another suggestion was developing senior/youth mentor programs for household skills, especially lost arts in needlework, cooking, and home canning. The mentor theme carries easily into the arts and theater. The love of memorizing and reciting is a lost art which is still alive in senior people. It provides an opening for connections across generations, and for community theater.

Obviously, none of the above suggestions are the sole province of neighborhood organizations. As a matter of fact, most have probably been tried in one form or another by YWCAs, schools, and community education programs.

What is important is the suggestion that neighborhood organizations look to this kind of creative meshing of resources as an organization building and leadership development activity. What is particularly interesting about the youth/senior suggestions is how well they fit the concept of a hospitality which deliberately works to build new ways of communication for the whole neighborhood.

Minorities

Many try, unfortunately, to fit minorities into a "minority" category. Which minorities, how long they have been in the neighborhood, how they arrived in the neighborhood, what the history of relationships has been, all have bearing on how they are approached. Economic status and relationship to property also are important to consider.

In one city, different ethnic groups were organized into their own neighborhood groups with representatives sent to a general council-type meeting regularly. Several times a year all members would get together for reports and organizational

mixing. Needless to say, groups supported each other on major issues. And everyone gathered to celebrate organizational victories.

The practitioners made some interesting observations on the subject of the recruitment of single individuals from a minority group. Sometimes the arrangement has been called "tokenism." The general sense was that it all depends on the situation. There was general agreement that some presence was better than none.

Several people mentioned that being the single person from a minority group can place a severe strain on the person. A person should be able to do what he or she wishes and not have to carry the burden of history when they join a neighborhood organization.

If time goes on and the minority presence does not expand from one person to more, then the organization has to ask itself frankly: "It is because of our organization and the message we send or do we have a minority person who is essentially unconnected to their community?" It is important to note that, while helpful, one minority member does not constitute broad representation.

There are a few approaches to the underrepresentation of minorities that hold true for all the underrepresented groups mentioned in this paper. Restructuring how the organization does its business can be critical. Special attention should be paid to how the organization meetings are planned, when and where they are held, and how they are run.

Many minority families, as do others, work two jobs. The timing, content, and style of meetings and of activity participation become critical considerations. For people like seniors who are more comfortable meeting during the day, some groups have separate meetings in convenient places, with representatives attending general meetings.

Meetings that include child care as well as inclusion of children in the proceedings are becoming increasingly important, as are meetings which center around meals. Supper meetings with child care allow parents to come right from work and day care while also providing shared family activity and maintaining a reasonable bedtime for children.

It helps to have a strong tradition of food sharing because most organizations can't effectively organize unless it is based on pot luck and an automatic dishwasher.

The meeting place, atmosphere, and facilities for children have to inviting. Local churches often have good facilities with kitchens and play rooms. If the children don't look forward to the meeting and have fun during it, the parents aren't going to come.

Working parents, whether they are "minority," renters, home owners, report two critical needs:

1) low cost entertainment for the whole family; and

2) activities for which they don't have to leave the children after having been gone all day.

The first point in adjusting an organizations' accessibility is being willing to do it. After that, it is important not to proceed without consulting the supposed beneficiaries about what they actually want and need. If neighborhood people have been using meeting times or place as an excuse for not participating, and then the organization corrects it but they still don't come because it wasn't the real reason, then what has been gained?

Just as an organization is not built by putting notices on bulletin boards, so also an organization is not maintained by proceeding on assumptions and analysis done in vacuums.

When we asked: "What should an organization do first?" one of the minority practitioners responded: "Tell them to ask us what we want!" In a way, it is as simple and as complex as that.

The following is a list of possible steps for approaching minority communities. The suggestions are predicated less on welcoming minorities "in" than on inviting them, through their own groups, to share in building a new "place" as described earlier. With appropriate adjustment, they would seem to make sense for any group.

1. Don't assume that because people don't belong to your organization they are not organized.

2. Ask the help of individuals in the minority community who would be best to talk to, ask advice and assistance of individuals who are knowledgeable about the community. Be aware that the direction and momentum for action have to come from strong leadership on both sides from the beginning.

3. Find out what the main organizations representing the interests of the group are and invite them to conversation. The first conversation may take more than one session and has as its goal the establishment of a core of leadership from the neighborhood organization and from the minority group who are willing to sponsor "conversations." Make the core groups's experience the informal basis for designing the conversation process for the larger group.

4. Make an organizational commitment to a series of meetings. Don't expect to really learn anything in one meeting. In one meeting you learn enough to know better questions to ask next time. Include as many groups members as

possible in the process. Decide with the core group how many people should be involved the first time around.

5. If possible, arrange for an institution which is respected and trusted in the community to host a series of conversations. Make sure the institution can provide facilities for sharing of meals and cultural events. But also make sure that the physical environment is not imposing or alien.

6. Have a mutual understanding that the conversations are not goal oriented. By the end, each group should understand more about the other's life and how that might translate into shared concerns toward the neighborhood as a "place" for living.

7. Appreciate that it may turn out that economic and cultural survival take precedence over all else for the group at this time.

8. Plan for celebrating the close of the series of conversations with a gathering intended to celebrate the culture and history of the peoples involved and of the neighborhood.

9. Be aware that the group your organization approaches may be quite wary at first.

10. Plan for further discussions that could consider how an organization could support the goals and aspirations of the group.

Ways to proceed

This paper and the conversations on which it was based asks a lot of questions. Questions are a good place to start. Answers are often found in good questions. Not one of the practitioners who contributed to the building of this paper pretended to have the answers. As a matter of fact, they often answered the questions with questions.

The organization that confidently asks itself questions and then presses through to at least beginning solutions will be on the right track. Joining with others to share questions is important.

The following are summary suggestions of ways to proceed:

Understand and help your people understand that your organization is on the right track in asking the question about underrepresentation.

Use the opportunity to help your membership take a fresh look at your organization's story and accomplishments. The question you are asking is about the future. The past is useful to the extent that it helps us understand what is best to do in the present, so frame your questions positively: "How can we be more inclusive?" rather than "How do we handle the problem of underrepresentation?"

Have frank discussion with key leadership and staff. Give people space to say what is on their mind. Create an atmosphere of trust.

Be sure your active membership has the opportunity to take part in conversations about underrepresentation of neighborhood groups in your organization. Allow them space and trust. Keep your membership with you in the process. Take your time, don't rush to action. The most important organizational decision is for inclusiveness and hospitality. The who and how come after that.

Ask how you may be acting as an organization that could be giving inhospitable messages to other groups in your neighborhood. Talk about what your organization's bottom line is. What is your stake in the neighborhood? What stake do you expect of potential members? Is your definition of "stake" creative and flexible enough?

Do your homework. Get the statistics. Ask you neighbors. Involve the membership in getting the information.

Decide what is possible for your organization. Pick the most accessible action and move on that. This may mean deciding what target population you will address first. It means a timetable and action calendar. It means having enough members committed to the necessary actions.

It is better to have successful small actions which are part of a well-planned campaign toward a goal than to work hard on one big splash event which does not have organizational purpose.

Encourage your membership to think about what organizational hospitality would look like for them. The questions might include:

Are there ways we have to change to be hospitable?

What does it rally mean to reach across cultures, lifestyles, and age in a neighborhood?

Can a mutually advantageous balance be struck between homeowners and renters?

Can we be honest enough to say we want to live in a well-kept neighborhood and to protect our major life investment?

Do we want to make a commitment to engaging seniors and youth in our organization?

What is the balance between doing service and expecting responsible participation from people who benefit from the organization?

Ask the necessary questions before acting. Be willing to act before you have all the answers.

Appendix A: Key Informants

Below is a list of the people interviewed for this paper. Organizations are listed for identification purposes only.

Louis Alemayehu, COMPAS, Saint Paul, MN

Yanat H. Chhith, Cambodian American Association of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

Rev. William Gebhard, Christ Lutheran Church, Saint Paul, MN

Dawn Goldsmitz, Thomas-Dale District Planning Council, Saint Paul, MN

Ron Hick, Lexington-Hamline Community Council, Saint Paul, MN

Kirk Hill, Tenants Union, Minneapolis, MN

Doug Lawson, Campaign for Human Development, Washington D.C.

Paul Marincel, Inner Urban Catholic Coalition, Saint Paul, MN

Amanda Martin, Ramsey Action Program, Saint Paul, MN

John Musick, Minnesota COACT, Saint Paul, MN

Kris Nelson, Whittier Alliance, Minneapolis, MN

Hai Nguyen, American Vietnameses Cultural Society, Minneapolis, MN

Ron Pauline, Aurora-St. Anthony Area Block Clubs, Saint Paul, MN

Magaly Rodriquez-Mossman, Office of Church and Society, American Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN

Ellen Ryan, Family Farm Organizing Resource Center, Saint Paul, MN

Rev. Warren Soderberg, Urban and Ethnic Ministry Office, American Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN

Nealcheng Thao, Twin Cities Hmong Community, Saint Paul, MN

John Wancheck, Carolina Community Project, Durham, North Carolina

Marian Wright, Gray Panthers, Minneapolis, MN