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Organizer reclaims 'the American dream'

by Zoe Ryan



Jesuit Fr. John Baumann (CNS/Bob Roller)

Jesuit Fr. John Baumann started the community organization Pacific Institute for Community Organizations -- now PICO National Network -- in 1972 as a training institute to help support neighborhood organizations in California. Today, more than a million families and 1,000 congregations from 40 different denominations and faiths participate in PICO, according to the network's website. Baumann discussed with NCR what he sees happening with conversations on the U.S. economy today.

NCR: From your long-term perspective, what do you make of all that's going on in the U.S. today regarding economic disparity, Occupy movements, etc.?

Baumann: I'd say that many Americans believe that the American Dream, also known as 'America is the land of opportunity,' was once true, but it doesn't hold anymore. Every previous generation has really known America as the land of opportunity, where children were expected to do as well or better than their parents. Yet, today we find our nation in a crisis, with record levels of poverty, the rising inequality and worsening predictions for our children's future.

What is really troubling to me is this whole gap between the rich and the poor that has been growing over

the past 20 years or more. It's not an aberration; it's a result of deliberate choices. It seems like that over the last 40 years, a series of economic choices have really redistributed the income upwards and as a result of that, it provided less and less opportunities to everyone else. All this has led to the financial stress on our families, and really it's something that hasn't been seen since the Great Depression.

When you started PICO years ago, did you ever imagine that this discussion of income inequality would be happening today?

When I started PICO, then, as now, I saw organizing as a way of responding to people's pain. Organizing was a means of giving people an opportunity to express their values and their faith by forming faith-based organizations that gave them power to act, to bring about change so that their families would have a better quality of life. Today, organizing continues to respond to people's pain, especially what we're discussing -- the results of inequality and class warfare. People want to make a difference. I often thought that if our elected officials were doing their job, responding to the needs of people, there'd be no need for organizing. Organizers would be out of a job. We really expect a government that works for everyone, not just for the powerful. So today I would say faith-based organizing is needed more than ever. People want to make a difference. They want their children to do as well as or better than their parents.

Are you happy with today's discussion, that people are discussing it more in everyday conversation?

Again, it demonstrates to me the need for faith-based organizing. The faith community has a pivotal role for people to express their faith through action. The people, I believe, were inspired by their faith to seek, to unify people to reduce poverty, to bring about justice. Again, it's about taking our faith into action, and it's about challenging our elected leaders to put first the needs of families and the common good of our nation. People want to remake America into a land of opportunity for all people. I think this discussion continually highlights the importance of people uniting and coming together. And really, what all this means is people want a fair tax code that insists everyone pay their fair share, people want an increased access to health care, they want to end the foreclosure and underwater mortgage crisis, comprehensive immigration reform policy with a path to citizenship, strong federal action, I believe, to end the mass incarceration of people of color -- these are things that people just have always wanted. They have wanted a better quality of life for their families.

What is your assessment of what is happening with all these protests and speaking out: Is it a good thing or a bad thing?

I'm thinking in terms of the fact that I'm a clergyperson, and think in terms of and also the role of clergy that play such an important role in faith-based organizing. It seems to me that many Americans long for a stronger moral leadership from churches and clergy regarding what's going on in our country, especially the economic problems. I'd like to think of it in terms of just as God called the ancient prophets in our scriptures to condemn injustices, I think we, too, as clergy and through our community organizations must speak out when we see the unchecked greed of wealthy elites and the corrupting influences of powerful special interests. I think it's important that we speak out, not only as clergy but through our faith-based organizing that we speak out.

Do you think the clergy are doing that today?

Through PICO we're making a strong effort to reach out to clergy across our network to do this. We have actually put that in motion, to give clergy an opportunity to sign onto what we're calling a prophetic voice for our country. If you go to our website, there's the statement that clergy have put together that we're anticipating getting 20,000 signatures to this prophetic voice statement, a call to action as we're calling it.

Any other comments?

I keep getting back to, again, many Americans believe that the American Dream, which is "America is the land of opportunity," that was once held true doesn't anymore. And that it's very important that we don't

sit back. We need to speak out and do something about it.

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