Samuel Chu recalls the day a church member came tearfully to Los Angeles’ Immanuel Presbyterian Church and told him her landlord had doubled her rent overnight. “Of course, our first idea was to help her pay the rent,” says Chu, a pastor who is Immanuel’s director for relational ministries. “But the next day 14 of her neighbors all showed up as well, so I knew right then that a different approach was needed.”

Chu set up some house meetings in the hardscrabble neighborhood just west of downtown Los Angeles. “They needed empowerment to be able to address the causes of these escalating rents,” he explains. “During the course of those meetings leaders emerged who did the research to learn who is making the development decisions that are forcing families out of our community.”

The newly formed group enlisted support from ONE-LA, the largest congregation-based community organizing coalition in the country. They determined that there isn’t enough government funding for...
affordable housing in Los Angeles. So they organized a petition drive to put a bond issue to raise capital for affordable housing on the November 2006 ballot. They then organized 400 precinct workers to go door-to-door in their neighborhood, drumming up support for the ballot measure.

“Such a bond issue requires two-thirds approval,” Chu notes. “We fell short—only 62 percent citywide, but in our neighborhood, where we did the precinct work, the approval rate was more than 80 percent. These folk built and learned power for themselves and next time they won’t be stopped.”

BEYOND CHARITY
Chu’s story is one example of a grassroots approach to poverty and related issues that is transforming the way many congregations relate to their communities. More than 170 congregation-based community organizations (CBCOs) have sprung up across the country as Presbyterians and people of other denominations and faith groups join forces with local agencies and service providers to work for change. Congregation-based community organizing as a model for ministry is growing in the United States as more and more communities face economic, social and political problems that simply cannot be addressed individually, says Phil Tom, a 35-year CBCO veteran and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s associate for small church and community ministry.
“Too many churches focus on charity to address fundamental issues of poverty such as jobs, affordable housing and health care,” Tom says. “They have trouble making the leap from building a house to addressing the systemic issues of housing and homelessness. Congregation-based community organizing is a proven method to get them to the next level.”

Community organizing began in the 1930s when Saul Alinsky applied its methods to racial tensions and urban workers’ conditions in Chicago. Alinsky organized the Back of the Yards neighborhood (made famous by Upton Sinclair’s novel The Jungle) to address horrific working conditions in the Union Stock Yards. He went on to found the Industrial Areas Foundation, which continues to this day to train community organizers around the country.

In the 1950s Presbyterian urban ministry specialists began using Alinsky’s methods to address the church’s concerns around race, crime and disinvestment in America’s big cities. “The focus of community organizing shifted to the churches in the 1950s,” Tom says, “primarily because churches, as the only viable institutions left in many urban neighborhoods, could provide continuity of funding and leadership that weren’t there otherwise.”

One reason Presbyterians embraced this approach, Tom adds, is that “the denomination also saw church-based community organizing as an effective way to congregational renewal.”

ADDRESSING RURAL POVERTY

With the sea changes that have occurred in American life, church-based community organizing has
taken on new dimensions. For one, it's not just an urban strategy any more.

Janet Adair Hansen is pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Cortland, N.Y., an 87-member congregation in the mostly rural, economically devastated upstate region of the state. “Most of the industry in this area has either closed or moved away,” she says, “and so the poverty has skyrocketed.”

Realizing that it couldn’t begin to address the area’s problems alone, Christ Church joined with 10 other congregations and religious organizations a little over a year ago to form MICAH (Moving in Congregations Acting in Hope). Using classic community organizing tactics—individual, one-on-one interviews that foster relationship-building prior to any concrete action—MICAH members talked to 250 individuals in the community over three months.

“We asked three questions of everyone,” Hansen says. “What do you see happening in our community? What worries you most? What is the one thing you would change if you had the power?”

The goal of such research, Hansen says, is twofold: “We’re looking for what the real issues are and which ones we might be able to impact.” MICAH members found that one issue of paramount importance to the community’s adults was the large number of children without health insurance. Their research uncovered 1,800 uninsured kids out of the county’s total population of 40,000.

“We’ve set a goal of having every kid in the county covered by some form of health insurance within two years,” Hansen says. “It’s taking a lot of education, a lot of political organizing, and some very practical first steps.”

Informational meetings in MICAH are empowering people to navigate the complex health-care system. “There’s a lot of pride here,” Hansen says. “People don’t want to think they’re accepting ‘welfare.’”

MICAH is also working with federal, state and local officials to cut through some of the red tape. “There’s five different offices, all kinds of time limits and too many complicated forms,” Hansen says.
“We’re trying to get all of that simplified so people can access what’s already available.”

And the group is talking to elected officials at all levels to advocate for implementation and adequate funding of federal SCHIP (State Children’s Health Insurance Program) legislation, first enacted by Congress in 1997 to address the problem of uninsured children.

REVITALIZING CONGREGATIONS
Some church leaders shy away from the community organizing model, fearing it might drain too many of their congregation’s resources. Not so, says Flo Watkins, pastor of Seigle Avenue Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, N.C. She insists her congregation’s involvement in a coalition called HELP (Helping Empower Local People) has been revitalizing.

HELP’s multi-faceted efforts—youth programs, job training and placement, affordable housing—are “John 3:16 for real,” Watkins says. “We’re trying to demonstrate that God so loves the world: socially, politically and economically.”

Last winter Charlotte’s mayor announced a summer youth jobs program, with city funding for 50 young people. “That wasn’t nearly enough,” Watkins says. So HELP went to work, and by summer 145 of Charlotte’s kids were employed by the program.

“It takes a village,” says Watkins. “That’s the model of Jesus. When you combine faith and the public arena, all the ideological lines get crossed for the sake of God’s vision for humanity and community.”

This model of ministry brings people of many ages, races and economic levels to the same table. It’s an antidote to racism and other divisive forces, says Watkins. “We’re turning ‘isms’ into ‘wasms’ here.”

“We feel like we’ve caught a giant wave,” Hansen says. “We know now that the faith voice will be an important part of the renaissance of upstate New York. When people begin to realize that together they can effect positive changes, they are invigorated and everybody wants in. I’ve had so many people come to me and say, ‘If this is what your church is involved in, I want to be a part of it.’”

“Organizing for me is a way to do church,” says Chu, who is the only full-time community organizer on the staff of a PCUSA congregation. “How do we turn pastoral care for individuals into the social, political and economic power that will address not just the individual need but all those who need that pastoral care?”

Training leaders who can only function in the church is short-sighted, Chu believes. “Good leaders, good organizers, good relationships are vital to the whole community. We need to develop community leaders.”

Chu tells of a rabbinitic student who recently came to Immanuel Church for a meeting on school reform. “He walked up to me and said, ‘It’s Tuesday night, you’re a minister and you’re here talking about school reform—aren’t you supposed to be in a church meeting?’”

“I told him, ‘This is it!’” Chu says laughing. “Being in the community in the fullest sense—that’s what it means to us to be the church.”

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