

Episode 3: The Other Basic Tool of Democratic Organizing: House Meetings

Luke Bretherton (LB) [00:00:05] Hi, my name is Luke Bretherton and this is the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast, which focuses on the history and contemporary practice of organizing in democratic politics. Running alongside this specific focus are two others. The first is to explore how organizing connects democracy and religion. The second is to examine how organizing embodies a distinctive vision and practice of democratic politics. In each episode, I talk to those who live and breathe community organizing about a different aspect of the work. The podcast itself is a collaboration between the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. In this episode, I examine the second key tool organizing uses for listening and building relationships: what they call the house meeting. As discussed in the previous episode on the one to one, listening and building relationships is foundational to how organizing develops its distinctive approach to democratic politics, an approach that is bottom-up and relationally driven—in other words, an approach that puts people before program. A politics that begins with listening and is attentive to the experience, conditions, and stories of people where they live and work needs practices for listening well. Along with the one to one, the house meeting is just such a practice. Initially developed by Fred Ross in the late 1940s, house meetings were further refined by Ross, César Chávez, and Dolores Huerta in the early 1950s as a key element of the organizing work that spawned the United Farm Worker Movement in California. As a distinctive practice of organizing, it's been in continuous use ever since. In this episode, I discuss the history of the house meeting, what it is and why it matters, how to do it, some of the issues and problems that often come up when facilitating a house meeting, how it feeds into building power and effecting change, and how it contrasts with other approaches to listening and engaging people in democratic politics, such as focus groups and surveys. To discuss these questions, I talk to Tim McManus and Maria Elena Manzo. Tim has been with the IAF for over thirteen years now, organizing in Dallas and Phoenix before becoming the lead organizer for COPA, the IAF project in the central coast of California. He is currently building a new IAF organization in California's Central Valley, and before becoming an organizer, he was a high school teacher. Maria Elena was born in Mexico and came to the U.S. aged 14. She was a farm worker going back and forth to Mexico until she was 30, after which she was able to settle in California. She's been a leader with COPA for almost twenty years and currently works as program manager for the Mujeres en Acción. And she tells me that she's the proud grandmother of three and a half and she'll explain a bit of that later. So join me now as I discuss the house meeting on this, the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast.

LB [00:03:30] Maria Elena and Tim, it's great to have you with me on this, the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me about the house meeting. I really appreciate you doing this. So, just begin—I want to begin with you, Maria Elena. Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and how you got into organizing? How did you encounter it and get involved in community organizing?

Maria Elena Manzo (MEM) [00:03:55] I was born in Mexico. I came to the United States when I was 14 years old. And when I turned 16, I started working at the fields. We used to come every season to work on the fields and then go back home to Mexico. And and I didn't stay in the United States until I was about 30. But when I was working at the fields, it was during the César Chávez time and it was the first time I had an opportunity to learn about doing something different with what you had. So I remember the marches that we would have. I think people started—I wasn't even sure what I was doing at that time. But I understood that people were walking from the Imperial Valley and so they got to Central Valley and we started walking. We would walk from one city to another. One day we would walk from one city and then go home and come back the next

day where we left off and go all the way to from San Lucas to Salinas. And that was my first real interaction with any organizing. And after that, I became our crew rep and delegate at one of the assemblies. But really, I was really young, not really knowing what I was doing. But it was just interesting. And I think that gave me a little something, an idea what could happen when you organize. But, like I said at that time, it was fun. It was—and we did it, but not knowing enough what it was doing.

LB [00:05:32] So, how old were you when you got involved in the United Farm Workers movement? What age was that then?

MEM [00:05:38] I think I was probably 17, 18 at that time. Yeah. So I guess after that—at first, it was, we're on a strike so we're not going to work today, but we're going to walk. And we were trying to get the company to let us have a labor union, to be unionized.

LB [00:06:03] And so how did you first encounter—so that was union-based organizing, obviously amongst the farmworkers. How did you get involved in community organizing then?

MEM [00:06:14] Well, for years I didn't do anything else than—if I there was something I could do with, for my neighbors but then never involved in anything, nothing to do with politics. I moved to Salinas—back to the area in Salinas—in 2001. And I remember for the first time I wasn't going to be working, so I thought, "This is time for me to get involved with my church." So I went to Mass and they invited us to go to a meeting. And at this meeting, I remember that they were talking about anger and they had a candle and they turned off all the lights. They gave us each a candle. And then they said the anger was like the fire, so you could light up a room and they started lighting up all the candles or you can burn the fire. And I thought, "Well, that's really interesting, you know." And so I went there—to the meeting—and then I started meeting with the organizers and learning more. I was not sure what I was doing, but just thinking that this sounds very interesting.

LB [00:07:24] I just want to pick up on something we were talking about earlier, which is just to say a little bit about—you described yourself as a grandmother having three and a half grandchildren. Could you just explain the half?

MEM [00:07:35] [laughing] Yeah, I have two granddaughters, a grandson, and another grandson on the way. So that's three and a half.

LB [00:07:46] Fantastic. Tim, turning to you, tell me a little about—because you were a teacher initially and then the journey from that into organizing. Begin a little bit about where did you grow up and how did you make that transition, then, from being a teacher to being an organizer?

Tim McManus (TM) [00:08:01] Yes, so I grew up mostly on the East Coast. I was born in New Jersey and grew up predominantly in Massachusetts and went to Boston College and studied theology and was trying to—I had been immersed in Catholic social teaching and social justice and things like that through my education and some of my parish upbringing. And I was trying to figure out what to do with that, how to put that into practice. And I went into teaching, coming out of college, feeling like that was a pathway, an avenue to try to achieve social change, to try to make the city look—to make Boston look different, make the places I was working in look different. I did a teaching program that sent me down to Dallas, Texas, and it was there in Dallas that I first encountered organizing. I had been teaching there for a number of years. And the neighborhood I

was living in and teaching in—where most of the families that the students I was teaching were coming from—had just a lot of issues with safety, with neglect from the city. Drugs and crime. And I was, as a teacher, trying to figure out what can we do about this and what could the school do and what can my neighborhood do? And I was meeting with other organizations and trying to figure out who was doing good work in this area and who could make some change—and really coming up empty, and not finding those kind of answers. And meanwhile, the problems were just getting worse and worse. And, similar to what Maria Elena said, I came across organizing through my church. I was going to a small Catholic church in South Dallas—Holy Cross Catholic Church. And one Sunday, I took home the bulletin and there was a little blurb in there about coming out to a meeting on Tuesday night to talk about safety in our neighborhood. And I always tell our leaders, "Don't don't rely on that. I'm probably the only one who's responded to a bulletin invite and showing up at something." And so—but I came out to this meeting because I was just racking my brain, trying to figure out what we can do. And I had never seen anything like it. I walked into this room in my church and I watched these women from the choir, these readers from our church, these people who I saw every Sunday, these grandmothers running a powerful meeting. They had the city councilwoman and the police chief from Dallas right there in the room telling these incredible stories about alleyways that haven't been cleared for years, about car fires and police response times and drug houses and demanding results, demanding change, setting timelines on that. When are you going to shut down the drug house? When are you going to clear those alleyways? And I'd just never seen anything like it. And sure enough, within a couple of weeks, the drug house was shut down, the alleyways were cleared, we had a commitment from the police chief about restructuring hiring and policing in Dallas. And that was my first exposure to organizing. Now, at the time, I noticed there was this man sitting in the back of the room taking some notes and seemed to be very involved in the meeting, but not at the center of it. And I introduced myself to him afterwards and found that he was an organizer with Dallas Area Interfaith, the IAF project in Dallas. And I just asked him, "What was this? How'd you do this? Tell me more about it." I started meeting regularly with him—a guy named Steven Butler—and learned about this model and this approach to social change that I had just never heard about and became fascinated by. And after a year as a leader with DAI in Dallas, I left teaching to take a job as an organizer there.

LB [00:11:30] Fantastic. So, Maria Elena, we're going to be focusing in this episode on the house meeting. What is a house meeting? How would you—if you were going to invite someone to one—how would you define it, describe it, and what does it involve? Because I'm imagining most people listening to this podcast really won't have an idea. When you say a house meeting—if they're anything like me—they think a kind of '90s rave and everyone dancing. So, what is a house meeting?

MEM [00:12:00] Well, a house maybe with a small group conversation to understand what's happening in the community. It doesn't need to happen necessarily in the house. It can happen in the house, at the school, at the church, or the park—anywhere. And what we're trying to do is understand what's happening in the community. That's what we're trying to do. So the house meeting is some of the fundamental tools that the IAF has. And what it aims at is to look for leaders and also to have an understanding of what's going on. Every community has its own suffering, pains, and anger. But in the house meeting, it's a chance, an opportunity, a place to make sense of what they're feeling and also the possibility of a change—the imagination that something can be changed. So this is a space to learn and grow and create a strategy. And also it's a tool for solidarity, because we have people from different communities suffering from different pains, or in the same community but having different experiences of certain—one thing that I can

share is recently—in one of the of the house meetings, we were hearing stories, the story of Adriana, whose father passed away a couple of months ago, because he was a farm worker, older, with some underlying conditions. He had diabetes. And still he was working at the fields and he died. Well, Jack Kirby is from a completely different community—an Anglo, more affluent community. But listening to the story of Adriana made him think that even though he said the age is probably over 75 and it's time for him to get the vaccine, there were more people that needed that vaccine at the fields. And so I remember him saying, "If people tell me that I need to wait a couple more months for my vaccine so the people in the fields that need this vaccine more than I do, I will be willing to wait. I thought I could save another Adriana's parents from the fields, I will be willing to wait." So that's what we create in this house meeting—it's listening to a story and allowing the story to change you and move you to do something different and do something in solidarity and see the vision that you can make changes together.

LB [00:14:57] So, we're going to come back to the practicalities question. But I want to turn to you, Tim, and have a think about the history. Where did the house meeting come from? Who developed it? How was it developed? Can you say a little bit about its origin story?

TM [00:15:13] Sure. There was a man named Fred Ross, who was the first IAF organizer in California in the 1940s. He was tasked with going up and down the state of California and building what you call these community service organizations, these IAF projects in California. And he, while doing work particularly around segregation issues in Southern California, discovered this tool of house meetings. And what he was trying to accomplish was figuring out—he had to build up from nothing—he had to build these organizations from nothing and go into a community where he is the white guy coming into a Mexican neighborhood in Southern California. And he had to figure out how he was going to build these things and what he—his insight was that people have networks. People already have networks and they can bring those networks together. And that was how he was going to try to get into lots of conversations with people. I mean, a house meeting essentially is scaling up the conversations that you're having to a larger number of people. And so he would meet with somebody and say, "Is there anybody else that is concerned about this problem in the fields or this problem with segregation in the school district?" And they'd say, "Yeah, and I can I can pull some of those people together." And so in that person's home that night, that person would bring ten, fifteen, twenty people together from their work crew or relatives or people they knew in the town. And he would have these conversations where he would hear what was going on. But he would also start to lay out, "Well, what if we did this? What if we registered voters? Or, could we pull other people together?" And start to to lay out some possibility. And, as Maria Elena pointed out, to develop some imagination in these people. But it would always end with, "OK. Can we do another one of these tomorrow night? Who can pull people together tomorrow night?" And somebody the next night would pull together their crew. Then somebody else would pull together their crew. And so, after night after night after night of doing these house meetings, you could talk to hundreds of people. And it was in a setting where people felt comfortable talking. It was small enough size that people were willing to speak. They felt more comfortable—it was in somebody's home. Somebody they trusted had invited them into it. But it was big enough that it felt like there was some energy there. And so, he was doing this to look for the leaders that would help him build these organizations. And in that process he discovered some of the most talented and historic organizers that that we know of: people like César Chávez or Dolores Huerta or Herman Gallegos—these legendary organizers who went on together to build the farm worker movement came out of house meetings and learned how to teach and how to lead house meetings by working with Fred Ross.

LB [00:18:06] What was the translation back into community organizing? Because obviously it was taken up in the farm workers and—for those who don't know the history—the CSO Community Service Organization then formed the seed bed, but then the United Farm Workers Union actually separated from them and became its own independent thing under the leadership of Chávez, Huerta, and others. But obviously, then, there were lessons learned. Can you tell me a little bit about how it came back in to become such a central tool in community organizing?

TM [00:18:36] I think the key aspect to that is the—central to the IAF's broad-based organizing model is the organizing of institutions of community-based institutions that could build the power to achieve change in a city, in a neighborhood, in a region. And to do that, you've got to get deeper into those institutions and find leaders in those institutions and build solidarity and create some imagination. And so they become a tool for organizing an institution, going back into a church and having dozens of house meetings to really build up the energy to move something forward. And that's very connected to the origin of these house meetings also—it just is—the IAF's aim is not about building out a union. It becomes about how do we organize and agitate these institutions to live out their mission in the world? The way that in organizing we think about house meetings is how does this help us get into and dig deeper and look for leaders in the community-based institutions that exist and that could develop more power?

LB [00:19:37] So in that sense, then, it's identifying people who are embedded in existing network structures, ecologies of relationship, and have the trust and the authority because people know them and therefore can draw people together. If someone could get twenty people to their house on a rainy Thursday evening, then you can—that's a sure enough sign that someone's got the trust and people will show up for them. And therefore, if you wanted them to show up for a meeting with the police chief or the mayor, they're also going to be able to bring those people and draw them together. I think it's a very important sense. I think the other aspect of that—that comes out of what you say—is how the—often we think of things like the clinic work or the church as either private or merely service, but there's something there in the interrelationship between the faith-based institution, the service-based institution, and then how that forms the seedbed of more explicitly political work and building of power. And we shouldn't see in them as a binary opposed but actually, there's an interlacing of the two: you can't have one without the other. And the house meeting is the way in which they're stitched together, as it were, in that process. So, Maria Elena, can you just tell me a little bit about—particularly if we think back to the origins of COPA and its development as a coalition, which you were involved in from the outset—can you give me some examples of when and where house meetings were key in developing that coalition and some examples of how they helped shape and develop a campaign that COPA did?

MEM [00:21:20] Well, I can share about Esperanza Care. It's a health care program for undocumented in Monterey County. And that happened because of the house meetings. We started having house meetings, and listening to stories we learned that there was a gap. There was this need of health care and that we—there was enough energy to address this—so identified a leader that would be willing to work on that, and they were connected to the institutions, to the churches. And we continued—we started having house meetings. And we were able to bring stories from those house meetings to the director of the health department, together with all the leaders from different institutions—and bringing to the health department a story that they didn't know—that they weren't doing a really good job. There was one meeting specifically with the director of the health department with some clergy—and some lay leaders were at this meeting, where we shared the stories of people and I was able to share the story of being an asthma educator—of how if I had to do a home visit with an undocumented child from Monterey

County—trying to develop a plan for their asthma, the only plan that I could give them is wait until you have a severe episode, go to the emergency room so they can give you the medication that you need, and repeat. And once they go back home and feel better and then go back when you have a flare up again. Different from going to do a home visit in Santa Cruz County, where they have a healthy kids program, where they were covered, and I could develop a program. And the director of the health department was shocked to hear this. He had no idea this was happening. He thought they were covering. He actually told me, "No way to cover asthma medication." He had covered the emergency—the albuterol, which is emergency medication. But you do not cover the control of medication, which is what they need to prevent them from going to the emergency room. I mean, he didn't know this information. He thought that they were doing good. And by the end of the meeting, he offered to set aside—these kids don't have the access to medication. And so his proposal was, "What if we put fifty thousand aside for medication?" And in a county that's nothing, right? But that's the conversation. So we continue having house meetings and bringing the stories in and creating a strategy, developing the leadership for leaders, like me, that had never been involved in politics, to come to the supervisor and say, "We need—these are the stories that we're hearing"—and making it happen. So we started a pilot and for half a million dollars to have some medications, some tests done. But we continue. We continue having the house meetings and seeing the gaps. Yeah, I get my testing, but what do I do with it if I don't have access to a specialist? So we continue doing the house meeting, strategizing, meeting with the elected officials until they established Esperanza Care with two million dollars a year to cover thirty five hundred undocumented members with the full scope of primary health care and access to specialists, a bigger set of tests that could be done, and more medication. And all this happened because of that. Then, we continue having meetings and then we're troubleshooting and noticing that people were getting bills even though they were part of this. So instead of one person fighting for that bill that they got, we were able to—through all these house meetings and the conversation—make a systemic change where they fixed the glitch. And we were able to do that.

LB [00:25:43] So, it's both this element of solidarity and building relationship, but there's intelligence gathering. There's a sense in which you're finding out the real issues rooted in the lived experiences of the people who are affected by these policies or by these institutions. And therefore, not only identify an issue everyone's willing to work on, but actually then—in the story you just told, I think very powerfully—also ensure that that policy is rolled out in an effective way that actually genuinely helps. It isn't a kind of tokenistic gesture, but actually then you can—it helps with the accountability process. Is that right?

MEM [00:26:21] Yeah. And teaching leaders like me—just the layperson—to come and learn of what it is to do our research action and what do you need to learn to be able to make the changes, rather than standing outside the city hall with a poster and say, "We need help!." Now we have these conversations and organizing and learn to strategize.

LB [00:26:46] Tim...

TM [00:26:47] I think, Luke, that's an important insight about house meetings. At the heart of our organizing model is this belief that people in communities, people on the ground know what's going on and they know what they need and they know what's best for their communities. And and if they can build some power—that they can drive that kind of change that they really need. And what we find all the time, and especially with government—government and politicians—is they can be very disconnected from how things are playing out on the ground. They do not understand those gaps. They don't understand why this nice, fancy program aimed to help poor

people or help immigrants isn't really working. And they blame it on a whole bunch of other things besides the fact they just haven't fully listened to what's going on with people and how they can better serve, or how to tweak these programs and modify. And so housemate's can try to close that gap. One thing that we've been doing a lot of lately is asking elected officials to commit to—and department heads and other government leaders—to commit to just sitting in house meetings and listening. And right now, we're also doing that with police chiefs and police unions around policing issues, in particular in immigrant communities and some of the gaps that they might not understand of how people are experiencing police work.

LB [00:28:00] So, there's a sense there that—because often we can frame the relationship with public officials or business officials in these very conflictual terms. And I think that often is the case. There has to be agitation to get recognition before there can be meaningful relationship and collaboration. But often—in the story you were saying, Maria Elena—the officials themselves thought they were doing a good thing. They had a big data set. They had probably a very good education in public health matters. And that all said to them that they were doing a good program, at least as good as they thought they could. And so, in a sense, through the house meetings and through the stories and the experiences this surfaces, you're able to bring this to them and they—it's in, in a sense, their self-interest to respond. They're trying to develop a good program. And therefore, through cooperation with COPA, they were able to develop a more effective program. And that's certainly something I've seen in the London context, working with the King's Health Partners, which is a very large provider of health care in the whole of south London. And there, their collaboration with London Citizens was able to develop a much more extensive process of public health, rooted in a process of listening and engaging with and building up leaders to work with them to deliver public health work in that context—in a way in which they were tending to do programs which weren't actually connecting to people. So I think that sense of shared interest emerging between the—in this case, the health system—and the people they're supposed to be serving—is one thing that can emerge out of this. Tim, can you just tell me a little about—because I've done an earlier episode on the one to one—how do you see the relationship between the one to one and the house meeting, and can you narrate a little bit about how they work together—the different roles, tasks they fulfill in organizing?

TM [00:29:59] Well, they go hand in hand in the sense that—as Maria Elena lifted up earlier—the primary goal of a house meeting is to surface leaders. It's to identify new potential leaders. And so when you lead a house meeting, you need to come out of that house meeting with a couple of people you want to do one on one relational meetings with. So, if I've got ten people in a room, and I'm having this house meeting and I'm finding out what's going on with people and who's angry and who's got some energy—I'd better leave that meeting with—on my calendar—times that I'm going to meet with those couple of most interesting people. There's a selectivity about it. And you're looking for who—you can't do one on one meetings with everybody. And so house meetings can help you surface people you want to spend more time with, because in the relational meeting, that's when you can really dig deeper into understanding this person's interests. What do they want to do? And how does this fit in with what your interests are, what you're thinking about? And you're starting to imagine what could you be doing back in your institution? Or, how could advance? And so, you're—the conversation, the depth that you can get into in a one on one—you can't quite in a house meeting. And so, in a way, in a house meeting, you're having these many relational meetings—many one on ones with six, eight, ten people—that you're mixing it up. You're getting reactions. You're getting them to react to each other. But you're trying to see who from this group do I need more time with? And then it goes back the other direction. You do a relational meeting with somebody who looks interesting. You might ask them, "Can you

pull together a house meeting? Who else is like you in your church? Who else is like you in the neighborhood? Who else cares about this thing? Could you pull together house meeting?" And, as you said earlier, if that person can get ten people into a room, that's kind of interesting. You know, they've got a network. They've got people who show up on a rainy Thursday night to their room. I mean, that's kind of interesting. So, they—the two—work together really well. You do house meetings to get into relational meetings; you do relational meetings to see who can pull together house meetings. And they keep on building up this energy and this base of an organization.

LB [00:32:02] One of the things that strikes me—there'll be some modes of campaigning and mobilizing folk, which would—you'd have a house meeting and you would take everyone's email addresses and put them on a list. And then you would send them alerts to get them to turn out to different things. I'm struck—there's a real difference, then, in approach between that kind of thing I've just outlined and what you were saying. I mean, do you take people's emails at a house meeting? It seems like, this is a very slow process that is being engaged in it. Why this approach?

TM [00:32:42] Yeah. You're definitely building up a network. So, absolutely take emails. And you follow up with people and you invite people to things. And the ten people you have at your house meeting, you might invite all ten of them to the next time you bring in hundreds of people out to the county Board of Supervisors meeting. So there's an element to that. But that's not the goal. The goal is to find—who's my next Maria Elena in Salinas? How do I find her successor in her church? And that's what you're after. And we have an iron rule in organizing: Never do for others what they can do for themselves. And so, different from that campaign approach that you were describing—maybe many of us have been on those email lists you end up getting from a candidate or a politician or a campaign—they're interested in getting the information that will help them move their agenda or campaign or whatever forward. We're interested in surfacing you, the potential leader, and what you want to do, and working with you to shape that and shape that agenda. And so, there's a different approach, and it certainly requires more patience and more deliberation. But it's really about surfacing people and figuring out what they've got some energy for.

LB [00:34:01] Right. So turning now to the concrete practice—Maria Elena, can you say a little bit about—if you were going to set up a one to one in preparation for a campaign or building a coalition, how would you determine who should be there? And—very practical—it sounds silly and obvious, but very practical questions of how would you go about thinking about when it should be held, where it should be—should it be held in someone's house or in a church hall? How do you think about those kinds of factors? Very practical factors?

MEM [00:34:34] Well, you have to go where people can be. If we have a group or a leader that is willing to do—or wants to do a house meeting—to find people that are willing to work with her or him. And then if she wants to meet at the house, that's where we meet—at the house. Or if they don't have a space, we'll go to the church, we'll go to the park. Wherever it is, it doesn't—the space is not important. We have been doing it now through Zoom. We do small groups through Zoom. Whatever is needed—that's that's where we go. The place is not important. It's who you're meeting with: Who can bring those leaders?

LB [00:35:22] Tim, you wanted to say something.

TM [00:35:24] The other way to come at this is to look at where people are already congregating and gathering within an institution, but they're not yet being organized. The Esperanza Care story

that Maria Elena was sharing—one of our key places for doing house meetings was at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Seaside, because every Tuesday night they had a charismatic prayer group of undocumented immigrants predominantly that would meet for a couple hours. And there were two hundred people there every Tuesday night. Now, some of the key leaders pulling together that prayer group had been involved and been in house meetings and they knew the importance of this, and they wanted to help. And so, they would start their Tuesday night prayer meeting by for 30 minutes organizing people into house meetings and get people into groups of eight or ten to share their story. And so every Tuesday night, we were able to then meet with two hundred people to hear their stories about health care access and other concerns. Those people were already gathered. They were already together in person and relating to each other. But it didn't have this particular focus to it. And it wasn't about advancing some of their material needs around health care access. And so, looking at an institution and figuring out where are there already networks and people—whether that's a ministry, whether that's at services themselves or at a council meeting or whatever it is—and seeing, "Can we turn this into a different type of conversation than this group might be used to?"

LB [00:36:51] I think that's a great insight. The question of—often it's the kind of "if we build it, they will come" approach—like, we're going to have this meeting over here, and then we've got to persuade a whole bunch of people to come to some place that's an inconvenient time and an inconvenient place with people they don't feel particularly connected to. Whereas, what you're saying is actually identifying where are people already gathering? What do people already have energy for? Where's the energy already flowing? And then engaging with people where they're at rather than all the time demanding they come to where you're at. I think that's a very key point. So, Maria Elena, can you say a little bit—it's an odd thing to say to someone, "Come over to the church hall" or "come to my house and we're going to have this conversation." It's not a tupperware party. It's not a come over for a bit of cake and coffee. It's a very particular kind of conversation. How do you broach that for someone who's never done that kind of invitation before? How do you broach that and say, "Hey, it's not going to be weird, come over"?

MEM [00:37:53] Well, the first thing is like Tim is saying—you already have your network. You already have the people you see at church, that you see at the school. So, that's what you're bringing—bring your network, who is part of your network. And definitely—like in my case, sometimes you don't know. You haven't had that experience. You're not sure what it is.

LB [00:38:21] At a very practical level, when—do you set the chairs out in a circle? How do you begin the meeting? Talk me through the process of running a house meeting from beginning to end as people are coming through the door to when they say goodbye to them at the end? Can the both of you just lay out for me how one actually goes about running a good house meeting? What's the—in an idealized—obviously things are very adaptive to context and different situations, but in an ideal world, how does one go around structuring a meeting like that? From how you do the opening to how you do the closing. Tim, if I begin with you and then, Maria Elena, I'll come to you.

TM [00:39:04] The first important thing is you've got to have somebody who is the leader of a house meeting. So, somebody has committed to leading a house meeting and they're not a facilitator. They're a leader. And there's a key difference in how you think about the conversation. But it also helps to have somebody else with you who can be helpful as a note taker or a timekeeper or somebody else who can help you process and evaluate the meeting. So, when people can do this in pairs, that helps a lot. So if I'm the house meeting leader, then I might recruit

Maria Elena to come along with me to be my note taker. We don't want our house meeting leaders to take notes. We don't want them to be thinking about other things, because they've got to really run an agitational conversation with people that they're bringing together. So, when they start the meeting—these don't have to take longer than thirty, forty five minutes, an hour at tops. You start the meeting and you get everybody to introduce themselves, even if you think you already know each other and you've been in the room together. But to go around and ask people to introduce themselves, giving them a first opportunity to get into the conversation, maybe even asking them how many how many kids do you have at the school or how long you've been part of this parish or how long have you lived here? But something that allows people to enter into the conversation, to have their voice heard right at the outset. The leader then goes through some some ground rules. We've got a limited time. We're going to have a conversation tonight about how housing prices are squeezing people out of this neighborhood. And we want to hear your stories, your experiences around that. But to keep us on time and keep us on that question, I want to ask your permission to interrupt. Would that be OK with everybody if I interrupt. That piece of the agenda is really, really critical. The leader asking people's permission to interrupt, setting the tone early on that I'm going to be jumping into the middle of it. I'm going to be mixing it up. This is not a passive conversation—I'm going to be getting in there. I might have to cut you off to get to somebody else, or I might stop you for a follow up question, because I don't I don't understand your story or I want to get more detail out of it. But getting consent from everybody else on that at the beginning is important. So going through some basic ground rules, some expectations around time, and stressing to people that this is not a conversation where we're going to solve everything or theorize about the solutions to things. We just want to hear people's experiences. And then we'll talk about some next steps of how we might go about doing something about this. And just being really clear up front with people on that. I also think it's important that the leader of a house meeting model what they're talking about to start out—that they share their own story and experience first, to set the tone. So if I'm leading the house meeting, I set up the question, but then I also tell my own experience around how I'm getting squeezed out because of housing prices. And you give people a sense of what it is that this conversation is going to be like. Now, then the conversation happens and it's got to be—it is not a passive one after another, everybody take their turn, everybody gets their two minutes to say what they're going to say and we move on. This has to be an energetic, engaging conversation and the house meeting leader's responsible for making that happen. So that means interrupting. It means asking questions. It means getting people to react to each other. "Maria Elena, what do you what do you think about what Luke just said? Do you agree with that? Is that true? I don't know. I haven't heard that. Is that really true in this area?" You know, but getting people to engage with each other and starting to get a feel of who's angry enough about this? Who's concerned enough about this that they want to do something? They don't want to just complain. They want to try to change it, and be part of that. And so at the end of the meeting, you're getting a chance—you can go through some of the notes and what did we hear tonight? How was this conversation for people? But that there are very clear potential next steps coming out of it. And we're going to have a follow up conversation about housing next week. Who's going to come to that? Getting people that you're going to meet one on one, but there's always—it's got to go somewhere, or else people will be wondering, "Will I just share all that? What's ever going to happen from it? Why'd we do that? What's the point?" And so that's a simple overview of a house meeting agenda. And again, that can all happen in a good forty five minute session and with some good energy in it. And people leave knowing where it's going.

LB [00:43:22] How would you close out a meeting? If it's in a church context, do you say prayer? How would you—when there's been people sharing stories, and some of them might be quite

tender stories or difficult stories or traumatic stories—how do you draw things to a close or give people a sense of, OK, now it's on to next steps?

MEM [00:43:47] Well, if it's at a church, then, most of the time we will start with a prayer and then end with a prayer. But yeah, like Tim said, having a next step, knowing that the story that they shared—that was really painful—is not going to stop there. But how is it going to—what's next?

LB [00:44:10] So I guess that's quite key then. It's not just, "This is happening to me." That next step, then, gives people a sense of agency. We can act, and we can act together. And actually we're building something together to address that situation that isn't just a care and share set of gatherings. This is building towards shared action. I guess that's a very key element then—having that move towards another moment. So, to stay with you, Maria Elena, can you just say a little bit about—inevitably one encounters blowhards, people who want to dominate the meeting. How do you deal with them? How do you deal with the people who just want it to be all about them in the meeting? And what are some of the other ways in which house meetings can go wrong? And some of the ways you've found over the years to address this? Those awkward moments.

MEM [00:45:05] That's why it's so important what Tim said. They already gave you permission to interrupt. So you interrupt: "That's really good. Let's hear what Adriana wants to say or has to say a word." But one of the things that we'll tell you is that your meeting didn't go the way you planned—you go home, you leave with homework, you leave the house meeting, and then you have to go home and investigate what is the program that is going to help with this? Or you're going to have—when we leave the house meeting, we all have—everybody has to have a next step. So are you going to—are you willing to host another house meeting? But they have to have something else to do. But if I am the leader of the house meeting and I go home with homework, that means that it went well. I did my job. I didn't get any numbers, or I didn't schedule any one on ones—that didn't work. It was a gathering, not a house meeting.

LB [00:46:14] What were some of the things you've seen go wrong in house meetings? How have you addressed them?

TM [00:46:20] Well, there's definitely that. There are people who are just going to get off agenda and theorize and tell you the NPR story they heard the other day or, you know, there's going to be that. And Maria Elena is right on it. That's why you've got to get permission to interrupt, so that you're not necessarily trying to salvage that person. You're trying to salvage the rest of the group so they understand why you cut that person off or why you stopped listening to them. So that becomes important. So there are ways they can just be really frustrating. I think mostly the problem is if they're thought of as a gathering of information and a gathering of issues and stories and not thought of as a recruitment of leaders. And I think that happens much more often than the more disruptive type of house meetings—is that—and I know we've called them or others have called them at times "listening sessions"—our parish is going to do listening sessions. And that implies this sort of passive—we're just going to gather what the needs are here. And then to Maria Elena's point, the same group of people takes what they just learned and all the notes and all the needs that are out there and then goes and tries to fix them. So, I think, that to me is where these can go wrong the most—is if they're just thought of that way, that they're about gathering information, gathering issues and developing an agenda for the organization. They have to be about finding talent. They've got to be about finding leaders and figuring out what those leaders are going to do and giving them assignments to go do it and getting them getting them moving. That's got to be what house meetings are for. And so I think the biggest mistake that gets made is

that they're thought of more as this passive listening approach to the issues and not about surfacing talent.

LB [00:48:12] In a sense, they devolve into a kind of focus group. It's just one group of people coming along listening and thereby hearing important stories and getting intelligence about what's going on here among these people in this place at this time. But then those same people go away and they're the ones who have the agency. They're the ones who interpret it. They're the ones who then see themselves as tasked with addressing it, rather than the meeting being the means by which we discover together both our own agency—our willingness to act together—and some ways in which we can discern and discover what we're going to do together and what tactics or strategies are going to emerge out of the conversation. That's a very helpful—just draw out a little bit more, then—how you see that contrast between that focus group approach and a house meeting.

TM [00:49:08] Well, what you just described, the result of that—it creates two problems. One, the team of leaders, the existing leaders and organizers just get incredibly burnt out because they're hearing all this stuff and they can't figure out what to work on next. How are we going to do this? And now people are concerned about that and what are we going to do with it? And it's just exhausting. To keep hearing these things and thinking you're the one that's got to go fix them. I mean, it can create incredible problems. The other is on what it does to your community, to your your parish, your neighborhood, where you've just told people a bunch of things that are going on, but they haven't fixed it yet. What happened? We told you this and what are you doing about it? And I thought you said you were going to do something about it. And first, it teaches people that somebody else has to solve their problems for them. But it also creates this incredible dissatisfaction with people that—"Well, we shared all those things. We told you that policing is a problem here. What are you doing about it? Why haven't we heard anything from the team?" And so, it just it divides up who the leaders are and who are the people going through these things. And so you've got to try to break through that. And that comes from surfacing new leaders and getting them busy, getting them doing some work.

LB [00:50:17] Yeah, so that focus on shared action rather than one set of people being listened to and another set of people going off and doing the action on their behalf. That's that's very helpful. Maria Elena, can you say a little bit about, then, as house meetings move into developing that ability to act together—can you expand a little bit about how house meetings are connected to building power? How do they enable the generation of this power to act together?

MEM [00:50:46] I'm going to use the example of Esperanza Care again. We had the people that were telling us the story of their struggles, but we had people from another area of Monterey who had—I remember one of the bishops saying, "I have never in my whole life been without health insurance." So just having people on every side sharing their story and it acting together because we have people—if we're going to pass something like this, we needed people, we needed all the supervisors to pass this to approve Esperanza Care. So we we needed people—the West and the peninsula—that didn't need any health care. They have their own health care, but they're in solidarity with the stories that they hear. And we get the power because now we have all the supervisors that are going to approve. We're meeting with them and their constituents about this—the supervisors. So they have the power to push everybody to move this. And so that's what it is. I remember at the launch of Esperanza Care, when one of the supervisors, Supervisor Parker, said, "I just want you to know that this happened because of COPA. COPA came and told me about a program and came back and told me about a solution and kept coming and coming. So this

wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for COPA. This is not something that we as supervisors developed, but it is something that you all—leaders—did. So that's power.

LB [00:52:19] I have just done another episode for the series on popular education. And one of the things you've both been talking about is—particularly you, Maria Elena—how you came to understand more about health systems, and how the finances of that worked, through the process of house meetings. Can you just comment a little bit about how the house meeting functions as an educational process? How does it serve to build up what we might call popular education and an understanding of the conditions under which one lives and works?

MEM [00:52:54] Well, what you do at the house meetings—identify the leaders—and then give them the opportunity—I was given the opportunity to come and meet with the supervisor. And preparing ourselves before the meeting, knowing exactly what is my role and what I needed to do—at the beginning, it was to come and tell the story. But later on, as I understand more, it is figuring out strategies: How can we get to this? And talking about learning where there's money. And meeting with the supervisors and finding the allies that are going to help you understand where's this money that can be moved—that can be switched to cover this need that is there. So it's learning all those things. I mean, if you would have told me years ago that I was going to be meeting and understanding all these things—there's still things that are hard for me to understand—but that's why we have other leaders. So we're all together. We're all working together in each person brings their own part. One part that is needed, then, and just understanding that this is very important. So I have learned so many things—I wouldn't even know who my congressman was or my supervisor. And now I know who is—who can we count on depending on what we're doing. I have an insight of those things and that wouldn't have not been possible without COPA.

LB [00:54:29] So that connection, then, of, in a sense, the personal story,, rooted experience and the technical knowledge about how things and systems, structures, and institutions are working—that's in a sense—it's not the technical knowledge acting on people's living and working experiences. It's the marriage of these two things together that then actually generates policy ideas and strategies and ways of taking things forward that are actually rooted in the realities of what's going on rather than imposed on them. That's very, very interesting. So, Tim, could you just lay out for us a little bit about how you see house meetings embodying a particular vision of democratic politics? How is the house meeting—in its practice—a sense of what democratic politics should be about?

TM [00:55:26] My supervisor, Ernesto Cortés, calls house meetings the crucible of democracy. They are—democracy depends on the citizenry, or the people, being able to deliberate over community decisions and resource allocation and what's best for structuring the society. And we don't really have those kind of spaces to do that. We—most of us—maybe in the halls of government that can happen or in board meetings. But for the most part, most of us don't have the space to do that. And a house meeting—at its best—is this this place where we're coming together and laying out our different experiences around how something's playing out in our neighborhood and doing that with other people that maybe have had similar experiences, or maybe have had different experiences. And we're starting to have that deliberation—that out of that and out of those conversations and many others like them we'll start to shape an idea of how things could be better. Why does it have to be like this? I mean, if we're all dealing with that and it's not working, what could we be doing different? And so it's starting to—it's the birthplace of where those type of changes are going to come from. And when they're connected to power, and

power strategy that can actually lift up that vision in a way that decision makers have to respond to it, then it can lead to real democratic decision making. But the house meeting is a real way that people can do that and do that in a way that puts them in relationship to other people who they're sharing this geography with—this place with. I've seen this development lately of politicians wanting—developing apps and software and technology to get people to say what they need and what they want. And it's a good way to get information, but it's a terrible way to develop a democratic culture where people are actually having to do that in conversation with each other. And that's what a house meeting ought to be.

LB [00:57:28] I think the difference between gathering information and generating shared wisdom—their two entirely different kinds of strategies and approaches and visions of what democratic politics is about. One is quite rooted quite rightly in a sense of representative democracy: We need to find out what people are thinking and then go and act on that in the Congress or Senate or whatever. But that's very different from a democratic culture of shared deliberation and wisdom generation about who are we together in this? What are the issues that are affecting us? And how can we act together to address them and get our needs met and ensure that there is a more just and generous community that where we're living in? And I think these are very different orientations to democracy.

TM [00:58:16] And it's also a place where we we learn what belongs in the public realm. What things in our lives belong in a public conversation? A lot of times we don't think that these things we're going through belong in the public discourse. We think it's about us. We think it's about our failures, our mistakes, our problems that we've got to try to fight through. And we don't recognize that it's part of some larger collective need that exists out there. A house meeting can do that. I remember this very sharply during the foreclosure crisis where all these people were struggling and losing homes. And there was this incredible shame and disappointment and sadness. And in house meetings, people could start to realize, "Wait a second. It's happening to you, too, and it's happened to you. And maybe it wasn't just because I made bad decisions in my life. Maybe there's something else going on here." And so just start to recognize what ought to be part of a public discourse versus what's just the thing that I need to work out on my own is important. And a house meeting can create that sense of collectivism, where this is bigger than just me.

LB [00:59:21] That sense of a private grief becoming a public story. That sense that I'm recognizing there is a systemic and institutional dimension, so it isn't just my bad decisions about mortgage lending. Maria Elena?

MEM [00:59:37] I just want to say that I was frustrated when I was doing this—home visits to people with asthma—but I didn't know that I had any power to do anything. The house meeting was a university of of civic engagement and showed me that I could have power. There was a lot of people, very educated people in that meeting that I'm describing. And I was the one that had the power to switch the conversation because of the story that I shared. So it's learning where the power is and knowing that you can actually—you actually have the power to make changes—to people that are just lay people. And so using the house meetings as a university of learning your role and what you can do—that's what will lead to democracy.

LB [01:00:30] Fantastic. Maria Elena and Tim, thank you so much for joining me on the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast. It's been great talking to you and a rich and insightful conversation about the nature of the house meeting and its broader role in organizing.

TM [01:00:45] Thank you, Luke.

MEM [01:00:46] Thank you.

LB [01:00:55] Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast in which I explored the House meeting and its key role in community organizing and generating the capacity to act together for change. As with other episodes, I'll be putting some suggestions for further reading in the show notes on the website. But for now, let me say goodbye and I hope you join me next time as I continue this journey through the different elements of community organizing and how it embodies a distinctive vision of democratic politics. Goodbye.