

Episode 5: Leadership, But Not As You Know It

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. The podcast is a collaboration between the Industrial Areas Foundation, or IAF, Duke Divinity School and the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. This is the fifth episode in a series of conversations I'm having with those who do community organizing. And in this episode I examine the nature and purpose of leadership in organizing, how it's defined and understood, who are leaders, the difference between leaders and organizers, and what their respective roles are in the shared work of organizing. Leadership as a term is much mythologized and theorized, particularly in the world of business and party politics. Yet its role in on the ground democratic movements for change, I think, is little understood or studied in community organizing. Identifying and developing leaders is a crucial element of the work. As I've come to understand it, those involved in community organizing have a very particular—some might say, countercultural—understanding of leadership, one that runs against how leadership is spoken of in leadership training programs, institutes, and business schools. Now, I think there is a deep wisdom in how organizing understands leadership that can be applied in many, if not most institutional settings, but particularly in congregational settings, where I have a particular set of concerns. To discuss this approach to and understanding of leadership, I talk to Elizabeth Valdez and Bishop Douglas Miles. Elizabeth has nearly forty years of organizing experience. Having begun her work as an organizer in El Paso on the U.S.-Mexico border, she has since organized in the Rio Grande Valley, San Antonio, and now Houston, where she is the lead organizer of the metropolitan organization, the IAF affiliate there. She is senior organizer, as well, with the West/Southwest IAF network and has pioneered work to address infrastructure, employment, housing, and medical needs in the region. Bishop Miles has over fifty years of experience combining congregational ministry with leadership in addressing community needs of one kind or another. This work began with setting up the first homeless shelter with accommodations for women and their children in Baltimore in the early 1970s and has continued on with a number of innovative initiatives that address addiction, educational needs, and even starting an alternative juvenile sentencing program. He co-founded Baltimore's Interfaith Alliance and was a key leader in the development of BUILD, the IAF affiliate in Baltimore, of which he has twice been its co-chair. And as a leader, he has trained many organizers. Now, in his day job, he has built up and pastored large and thriving churches in Baltimore and Memphis. I should also just say, on a technical note, I was talking to Bishop Miles by phone so his voice can sometimes be a little bit fainter than those of Liz Valdez or myself. Now, without further ado, join me now on this, the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast, to discuss leadership.

LB [00:04:05] Liz and Doug, great to have you on the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast. It's a real delight and an honor to talk to you both on this theme of leadership. So let me just begin by the opening question I ask guests here, which is, tell me a little bit about where you grew up and how you came to be involved in community organizing. Bishop Miles, if I start with you.

Bishop Douglas Miles (DM) [00:04:33] Well, I'm a native Baltimorean, one of those few persons who in Baltimore, who have connections on both the east side and west side of town. I've been in organizing literally all my life. I started really at the age of 16 with a group called the Neighborhood Action Group and Reservoir Hill here in Baltimore. Upon assuming a pastorate at

Brown's Memorial Baptist Church here in Baltimore, that's how I got connected with BUILD, the BUILD organization—Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development.

LB [00:05:07] What was Baltimore like—tell me a little bit about the context of Baltimore at that time.

DM [00:05:10] Baltimore was one of the leading industrial centers on the East Coast, anchored by the Port of Baltimore and Bethlehem Steel. It was a part of the Rust Belt, strong in neighborhoods, very racially segregated. Baltimore was a leader that pioneered redlining in America. So that tells you a little bit about the racial dynamic here, as I grew up. I went to a segregated school—Dunbar High School. So life was community based, a lot of strong neighborhoods, but very racially divided.

LB [00:05:52] And were your parents very involved in the church that—do you come from a family of pastors or is this a distinct move for you.

DM [00:06:03] My dad was a pastor, but he was not in my life. I was a bastard child of his. So he was not in my life, but he was a pastor. So I grew up in church, strongly supported by my mother, and really did not want to enter ministry because of my father. But I could not ignore the call to ministry.

LB [00:06:26] Liz, if I turn to you. Tell us a little about where did you grow up and what was your journey into organizing?

Elizabeth Valdez (EV) [00:06:35] I grew up between South Texas, McCallan, the city of McCallan, and in Idaho. I come from a migrant family who used to migrate two thousand miles to work in the fields. And so my first organizing career was with farm workers, and learning from my mother how to negotiate with farmers. I think it was in the mid '60s that we met César Chávez, this big person that everybody was waiting for in one of the labor camps that we were at in California. And I was very young then. And so I remember going with my father to go see this person that was going to help us and guide us through this boycott that was happening in California. And so, but I met the IAF organizing with the Levi plants in South Texas. I was a member of the union—Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union—that now unite here. And I was the president of the local. And my journey at that time was to become a union organizer. That's what I wanted to be. And it was interestingly in that journey that I met Ernie. Ernie was doing a training session with the organizers and he did the session on pressures on family and power. Ernie Cortés, Jr.—he's the national IAF co-director. He did that session. And for me, just the light bulb went off. And he had already started to do the work in the Rio Grande Valley, where he created Valley Interfaith. So, I got connected as a leader. My church did not want to participate because the pastor said church and politics don't mix. And so it was through the union that I was able to become involved. And so I started organizing as a leader in '82 and then as an organizer in '84.

LB [00:08:48] Turning to you, Bishop Miles. How has organizing shaped your vision of leadership? I mean, how has it formed you as a leader and shaped how you understand leadership?

DM [00:09:01] Well, organizing—when I got connected with the Industrial Areas Foundation—really altered the way that I pastored. There were things that I was doing that were working that I didn't know why they were working. And IAF gave me a framework out of how to do ministry and organizing together, equipping me with such things as strategic planning and how to do accurate budgeting and the need to develop—invest myself in developing other leaders so that I wasn't

working myself to death. So it totally revolutionized the way that I approach pastoring and helped me in that regard to really build three congregations across America. The church that I pastored in Baltimore, when I went there was a hundred twenty five, when I left it was fifteen hundred. I went to Memphis and joined the fledgling organization, the Shelby County Interfaith. The church that I got there—there was seventy nine when I arrived, there were 800 when I left. I came back to Baltimore in 1992 and established a work that currently is Koinonia Baptist Church, which ultimately had two different locations here in the city of Baltimore. So it totally revolutionized the way that I approach ministry: investing in people, developing leaders, and helping people to understand the dynamic of power and the church's need not to be involved in Politics with the big "P," but to be involved in politics with a little "p" and the democratic process of creating power to create change.

LB [00:10:41] You talk there about the importance of kind of identifying and developing leaders as part of your own leadership practice. How do we get beyond identifying the usual suspects as leaders? What are some of, do you think, the hidden assumptions about what leaders should look or sound or act like that often inhibit really identifying the real leaders in a community?

DM [00:11:08] Well, I talk in terms of leaders and mouthpieces. In most churches and most communities, there are people who do a lot of talking but who have no following. And there are other folk who tend to be very quiet but who have tremendous followings. I often lift up, when I'm talking about organizing today, a woman who was a part of our current church, who was matriarch of her family, never occupied a leadership role in Koinonia, the never held an office. But when Ms. Lil spoke, her whole clan moved. And it was difficult to get anything done within the church unless you had Ms. Lil's support. She was the leader of the clan. And it is usually that way in most communities and most churches. There are people who do a lot of talking and then there are others who tend to be in the background who are who are the real leaders, the people who have real followings, who themselves have invested in people and who can then influence them to do things.

LB [00:12:16] That draws out very wonderfully, I think, the key in organizing that—the very simple definition that leaders have followers. Liz, just turning to you. Often we have these bad cultural expectations about leaders—that leaders are somehow male or white or assertive or speak English. But what Bishop Miles was drawing out there for us was how often we conflate leadership with those who hold office or who have institutional authority. But what do you think is wrong with that view of leadership?

EV [00:12:56] Well, I think that we leave people out like Carmen Anaya. Carmen Anaya was a leader in Valley Interfaith in South Texas. She lived in a colonia, which was a community that didn't have water, wastewater, paved streets. She had relationships with the entire community. She knew the people that lived there. She knew who was registered to vote. But she didn't know English, not a drop of English. She was not a citizen in the definition of citizen, that is, who was born here. She was a legal resident. And so it was her who organized that community and was able to challenge the power structure in her community where the stereotype of them was—they were people from Mexico. There were wetbacks. They were not families who were legal residents here—without understanding that the reason that they had moved to those communities was because housing was so expensive in the city. That's the only thing that they could afford. So we were talking about first and second generation families that were living in those poor areas. And so, one thing that she understood was that initially she said that she thought that public officials—that we work for public officials. She said it was her work with Valley Interfaith who taught her, no,

public officials work for me. She said, "When I came to that realization, this world began to turn." She said, "I fought so hard to teach them that we're not only voters, but we're organized"—and was able to leverage the resources needed through Valley Interfaith and the organizations in Texas—the resources that were needed to rebuild her community. The community that is there now is not the community that was there. And not only that, but she became a role model for others—to say to children as well as mothers and others to say, "This is your agency. It's what makes a difference. Your leadership is what makes a difference"—to the extent that now her son, Eduardo Anaya, is on the IAF board and has continued in her leadership role in that community. So I think we leave people like that behind, people that have a following, as Bishop Miles was saying, and can deliver that following. But they don't—they might not—they might lack the education. Some of them might not know how to read and write, but they're interested in rebuilding their communities. Their understanding of power is greatly appreciated.

LB [00:15:48] So, Bishop Miles, one of one of the things—and this particularly afflicts my slightly odd academic world—is there's an issue in leadership that's often associated with top-down, command and control forms of power, "power over" rather than "power with." And sometimes in reaction against this kind of experience of very top-down, domineering forms of power, there's an expression for leaderless organizations or a strong emphasis on the need for consensus decision making or flat institutional structures or horizontal institutional structures. And the assumption here seems to be that if—that any kind of leadership must inherently be oppressive. And now, in social movements, of course, there's been some pushback on this. There's a wonderful essay by the feminist activist and writer Jo Freeman—going back right back to the '60s—which she—it's called the tyranny of structurelessness. It's an argument about how the lack of structure and institution and an accountable authority actually itself can be very oppressive. And in some social movement circles, they talk about the need for leader-full organizations rather than leaderless ones. I'm just wondering, coming out of your experiences in the church and organizing, how do you see this relationship between leadership and power and this connection between "power over" and "power with" in the exercise of leadership?

DM [00:17:26] Well, I think that what usually goes missing in those organizations that tend to be flat is the sense of accountability—that in developing leadership, leaders have to possess what I call the three "A"s. A sense of accountability—willing to hold others accountable and to be held accountable themselves. Being accessible, making themselves available to the people that are that they are leading. And agitation—that is stirring up people to good works. And I think the key to all of it is having relationship. And that's where many organizations fail. The people are not in relationship with one another. They don't know each other's stories. They're not operating from the same agenda because they've never sat down together to create a mutual agenda. And a mutual agenda then leads to a platform where people can be held accountable and where leaders—and what I've found is, where there's a collective leadership, where there's not one single person, but a collective of leaders who take responsibility for the organization.

LB [00:18:44] So, leadership, if it's going to follow the three "A"s that Bishop Miles laid out there—there's a sense of—which I think is a wonderful framework—that sense of, it's got to be rooted. If the power is going to be accountable, it's got to be rooted through relationship in the concrete biography, experiences, actual form of life of the people it's meant to be serving. And when power is divorced—when the exercise of leadership is divorced from that or acting according to some ideological program, or isn't attentive to how people are actually living and surviving and thriving—then actually something's gone awry. Something's gone wrong with how leadership is being organized. So, building on that sense, then, beginning with you, Liz, how do you identify

leaders? As an organizer, what are you looking for? What are some of the marks of a good leader? And what do leaders do that others don't in this sense?

EV [00:19:50] Well, there are two tools in organizing that we use to identify leaders. It's what we call individual meetings, face-to-face conversations, where we begin to understand people's interest, where we begin to understand people's ability to want to change. And it is through house meetings, the small group conversations, where they're not solely about identifying the pressures that families are facing, but who wants to do something about it? Who is willing to act on it? Not—so people who have anger—anger, from our perspective, anger is very important. We all have anger. We just don't know how to identify it at times. And we keep it under or it explodes. And we say, therefore, anger is bad. And we said no, anger is a sense of loss and grief. And during this pandemic, there's thousands and thousands of families who have grief and have losses beyond. And so the question becomes, how do they build power to deal with that anger so that—John Casey talks in his book *Pagan Virtue* that it's been appropriate to anger and therefore we will not sin. But if we're not appropriate, it will—it can destroy us or we can hurt others. It is also about agitating people on their—this is not your fate. Alright, you can do something about it. You have agency. This is not your fate. God did not want you to live in these conditions. God did not want you to be suffering. It is us to understand that we are agents of change and we can make something happen. And it is in acting together that we find other leaders as well. These public meetings—a leader going before a school board that before did not see herself or himself as a leader and advocating for their children and the changes that they want to see in their children. They are amazed at how having power can bring about change.

LB [00:22:20] Drawing some of what both you and Bishop Miles have been saying—we can characterize qualities of leadership in organizing as those who have followers, those who are facing head on the challenges of their community and embedded in and have a meaningful relationship with people in their community. I would probably add that some people have a sense of humor—is important. [laughter] And they work through relationships, not status or position alone. I mean, status and position can be an adjunct to that, but as we discussed, they prioritize working through relationships and putting people before program—and share power and develop new leaders there. And as Bishop Miles was saying, themselves welcome evaluation and critique. Bishop Miles, out of that list I've gone through there, can you say a little bit more about why is anger important for leadership?

DM [00:23:34] Anger is important because it propels us to change. It's very much like pain. Most people, most of us do not readily embrace change unless we are either in pain or we're angry about something. And this is not rage. This is the sense of grieving about what has been lost or what should be attained. It's that kind of anger. It's the anger that makes you vision a different community, a different way of people interacting with each other, a different way of power being used. And without that people tend to just allow life to act on them rather than them acting on life. So that's why anger is very much needed in persons who are in leadership. I don't think there's any good leader who doesn't have some sense of grieving about what should be or what has been lost in our country today. I think that that's where many of our political leaders missed the mark of not understanding the sense of grieving that is going on in this country, in Appalachia and urban America, among women, among people of color. So they don't get the sense that people really want change and they don't want to be acted on. They want to participate in changing their lives.

LB [00:25:10] So, in that, how do we distinguish between the kind of legitimate sense of grief—obviously, there are people we could look at—think about something like white supremacy and the sense of the loss of an unjust world and an oppressive structures. And there's obviously a lot of grievance being expressed in the country at the moment—we might say, well, that's that's not legitimate grief. And obviously in IAF teaching, the word for anger taught around this—the Norse word for grief and this loss of a vision. How do we make those distinctions between what's legitimate to grieve for and what isn't?

DM [00:25:59] Well, I think that what's going on in America and in all of the communities, it's really legitimate grief. I think it's being interpreted and expressed in the wrong way. And I think that that's the need for relationship building and the need for people to be in conversation. Many of the grievances that poor whites have are the same grievances that poor blacks have—the sense of being locked out of the system, the sense of being "acted upon" rather than "acting with," the sense of losing whatever they perceive it is that they have lost. And I think that we have more in common in this country than we realize. But many of those who are in authoritative positions have used our various griefs to keep us apart rather than to bring us together. In Appalachia, there's the need for better internet service, just as there's the need for better internet service in urban Baltimore. There's a need for living wage employment. There's a need for adequate health care. There is a need for affordable housing. All those things are legitimate concerns. They're just being expressed—they've been allowed to fester and express themselves in rage rather than in anger.

LB [00:27:23] That's very helpful. So, yes, one of one of the things that I've learned through organizing is the importance of evaluation to getting better. And yet my overwhelming experience, I'm afraid, in churches and other institutions, is of leaders who refuse or fear evaluation, seeing it as a threat or challenge rather than a vital element of doing better—the kind of shared work we're invested in. And often another dynamic of that is, some leaders say, oh, they've had 30 years experience, but then they never evaluate. It's clear that they've had one year's experience repeated twenty nine times because there seems to be no growth or development over that period. I'm just wondering, why do people fear evaluation, in your experience, particularly amongst church leaders—what generates that kind of attitude?

DM [00:28:20] Well, from my perspective, I think people misunderstand the difference between criticism and critique. And evaluation is critique. It's not criticism. The purpose of evaluation is to help us to improve what we do. The purpose of criticism is really to tear down a person. And I think that that's why people fear evaluation. They feel that they're being judged rather than being helped.

LB [00:28:51] That's helpful. Liz, you've worked with lots of clergy over the years. How do you help them get past—or leaders of institutions get past—that fear of evaluation and see it as a vital tool to their own growth and the growth of their institutions and congregations?

EV [00:29:09] Well, I remember Randy Saravia, who was the first president of [cops?], said the difference is that you're critiquing the public role. You're not critiquing the person. So the first thing is to tell the person, "Do not take it personal. This is not about you, Luke Bretherton. This is about you, Luke Bretherton as the professor or Elizabeth Valdez as the organizer. And if you want to learn and grow from your experience, then we need to critique what went well and then what could you have done better. And so it's that public persona that we're critiquing. We're not critiquing the person. It's the public role that you are doing in a community. And pastors now ask, "How was my sermon? How did how did I do? Did the message come across?" And/or leaders,

when they have an action, we say the most important part of an action is the evaluation, because that's when we learn. We learn how to be better public people.

DM [00:30:16] A number of things are connected together with that. One is, it's impossible to do effective evaluation where there is no relationship, because people interpret that as criticism rather than evaluation. And the second piece is that persons in leadership have to have a healthy ego. There are too many people who are position holders who do not have a healthy ego. So any form of critique they look at as criticism.

EV [00:30:46] Yeah, Bishop Miles is right. You have to have a relationship. Otherwise you irritate people. [laughter].

DM [00:30:50] You don't agitate, you irritate.

LB [00:30:56] I sometimes use with students—if someone's leading a worship service and if they're over assertive, i.e. they've got too much ego, then all the focus is on them and no one can worship. But if there's not enough ego and then don't enter the space of authority that the community's given them to lead them in worship, then the focus is also all on them. And everyone's anxious and slightly clenching their buttocks because they're worried: Are they going to not get it right? Are they going to fumble the liturgy? Is the sermon going to be terrible? They aren't actually free to worship. So there's this very careful balance in leadership between having too much ego and too little ego and having enough just enough hutzpah so that actually you create a space for others to act.

EV [00:31:47] It's healthy ego, we call it. You've got to have a healthy ego.

LB [00:31:53] Liz, sometimes in the West/Southwest training, there's often the story of Jethro and Moses from Exodus 18—it's used to illustrate the need for leaders to be learners and accountable. Can you tell us something about that and what the story tells us about leadership?

EV [00:32:13] Well, first of all, I think Moses was doing what God had asked him to do, from his perspective. But we also need to think about where was Moses raised? Where did he learn this style of leadership? Well, he learned it from Pharaoh—and so top-down—people lining up and telling you their their problems. And so it is in having Jethro come and tell him basically, "Moses, you got it all wrong. God didn't tell you to take care of everybody's problems. He told you go to individual meetings with this mass of people and you will find leaders." And he even gave him the qualities that he should be looking for. And he said there are different levels of leadership. There are leaders that will have a following of ten, of twenty, of a hundred, now beyond a hundred, we find it pretty challenging to find somebody like that. Bishop Miles can be on the top of that level of leadership, but it's also about—the role of the leader is to teach them. And so Moses's role was about developing the people that he was to find in that midst. So we love that story, because so many of us leave our families behind, which is what Moses had done. He had left his wife and children with his father in law. We forget how to balance—and what does it mean to be looking out for talent—and think that we have to do it all to this day? We had a training this weekend and there were people that were raising their hands to say, "I feel like Moses. I do it all in the church." And we say they are the pillars. So you recognize the pillars, but the pillars need to be identifying others. The moment that you are a leader, you're always supposed to be looking and finding other leaders and developing other leaders so that the burden is not on you. Otherwise, our institutions,

our organizations are going to fall apart if twenty years later you have the same people in the center of the congregation.

LB [00:34:26] So that sense of then cultivating a distributed and shared structure of leadership—not this recipe for burnout where it's always the same people, always one person doing everything for everyone else—that's very much a service orientated pattern rather than how am I constantly building up, distributing, sharing structures of leadership and therefore enabling others to act through how I'm acting?

DM [00:34:57] Real leaders in the real world operate out of self-interest. You know, Jethro wasn't operating and teaching Moses a new way of leadership simply because it was a new way of leadership. Jethro didn't want Moses to kill himself because he would have been stuck with his daughter and her children. [laughter] Jethro operated out of self-interest. You've got to learn how to operate out of your own self-interest as well.

LB [00:35:22] That's great. But I think—in another episode of the podcast, we discussed self-interest and power. But I think that very key sense of self-interest, not as selfish and not as selfish interest, but how self-interest...

DM [00:35:39] Not selfishness but self-interest.

LB [00:35:41] And that sense then that Moses comes to realize how his flourishing is interconnected with the flourishing of the whole community, and so he gets an expanded and developed sense of both who he is and what his interests are and how they're intrinsically connected to the ability of others to act and realize themselves.

EV [00:36:05] If I may add to that, we also say Moses went from operating unilateral top-down. He was the leader. People were victims. There were not agents to be relational, which would be working with others, developing others, creating agency and more importantly, not violating the iron rule. And the iron rule is never, ever do for anyone what he or she can do for themselves, because otherwise we're taking away people's self dignity, self worth. We're saying, "I'm the expert. I'm the only one that knows how to do this"—versus teaching people how to be agents for change.

LB [00:36:46] I want to come back to the iron rule in a moment. I just want to pick up that theme. And it's never really struck me before, but a kind of key element—this is something that Michael Walzer, the political theorist, draws out about the story of the exodus as a whole—part of what's going on in the story is this movement from how do you take a people shaped by slavery, formed by oppressive practices, and generate a people who can act for themselves in their interests and not constantly be wanting to hark back to structures of oppression or take those lessons of oppression and then replicate them in their own community? And so it's sometimes referred to in democratic theories as the democratic paradox: How can a democratic people and democratic institutions be formed out of people whose primary experience is one of often authoritarian or very oppressive institutional practices—and that process of actually learning this more distributed, shared patterns of leadership is crucial to learning what it means to be a democratic people and a people who were able to seek and serve their interests as a people. So, Bishop Miles, just coming back to the question of the iron rule there. As Liz said, it's never do for others what they can do for themselves. What is actually meant by this and how does it connect to leadership and the role of the organizer, in your view?

DM [00:38:22] I think it's central to giving people agency in their own lives—that we can make people dependent upon us when we do for them, rather than teaching them how to do for themselves and with others. And I think that that's the key role of an organizer—it's to teach people that they themselves have certain power and they have ability to do and they should not sit around and wait for someone to do for them what they have been given the power to do for themselves. I think that that's one of the things that's killing the church today. It's this whole sense of doing for people as opposed to teaching people how to do for themselves and with others. And that's the tremendous challenge of every organization. And that's why any good organizing is consistently reorganizing, because it's so easy to fall into that trap of doing for people rather than encouraging them and agitating them to do for themselves.

LB [00:39:32] How do distinguish, then, between that kind of understanding of never doing for others what they can do for themselves and a very prevalent ethos in America of, you should pull your socks up, a gritty individualism—you can make it on your own. You shouldn't be dependent on anyone else. And it's all about individual autonomy rather than a more mutual, shared sense of how do we come together so that we can all thrive together.

DM [00:40:07] That's why the iron rule can't be taught in isolation. It has to be taught in conjunction with the need for relationship building and community. Because if you just operate strictly from the perspective of iron rule without underlying values, you do get what America basically puts forth as the consistent lie of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. If anyone has ever tried to do that—that's number one, it's impossible to do. And number two, it's not good to do, because it makes you then become very selfish and very critical of others who may not have the same talent or gifts that you have.

LB [00:40:52] I think that rule, unless embedded in that sense of reciprocal, mutual flourishing and a sense of a kind of common life or pursuit of a common good, it does then replicate that bootstrap ideology. Liz, so, for a community to act together, it needs leaders who can bring together it's dispersed energy, if you like, and engage it in a common purpose—that there is a shared life here that needs cultivating and nurturing if everyone's going to thrive. So leaders give meaning and purpose to shared action. How do you think leaders earn that authority and recognition in the community to do that kind of work?

EV [00:41:38] By acting together—people, then, from their experience, begin to build relationships of trust that you are being inclusive of other leaders in your community. This is not just about you. This is about sharing power with others and giving others the opportunity to learn that this is not just about me learning, it's about how others are learning with me and how am I building relationships. And it's only in acting together that we build that relationship of trust. If you're going to be with me when the tough gets going or are you going to disappear? Are you going to be gone when when when the tough get going? Are you going to be there for the takeoff and the crash landing or only for the takeoff and not there for the crash landing? Are you going to be at my side, having my back? And so people—that's what they see in their communities. They're out there by themselves too many times. And it is when they're acting with others and seeing that others are standing with them—in doing politics and in building power in their communities—is where they build trust.

LB [00:43:00] So that building of trust through relationship and the earned authority that develops around that. So Bishop Miles, one of the things—I mean, you're a preacher. You tell stories from

the pulpit. And and I'm just wondering what do you think the role of storytelling in leadership is and what's the role of leaders in making sense of a situation by narrating it? And are there particular stories you think are very helpful? Or, what do you draw on to frame issues through stories?

DM [00:43:38] Any good preaching, any good leadership has to be anchored in the ability to tell stories and to see stories, because people remember stories much more than they do just lectures. When people can relate—because people relate to what other people have been through. One of the classic examples that I use in teaching and in preaching is the story of a woman named Valerie Bell here in Baltimore who was a contractual worker with the city of Baltimore who was literally being abused, was working for basically minimum wage, and to watch Valerie Bell evolve from a frightened little worker part time into a dynamic leader and build where she was standing before the mayor and demanding that he do something about living wage jobs—and on the spot be offered one by him. People remember that more than they remember that a part of leadership is the ability to confront. They remember the story more than they remember the principal. So storytelling is central to who we are basically as people. And it's central to the ability to communicate things that people will remember.

LB [00:45:04] Liz, how do you how do you see the role of broader storytelling and narrative in the work of organizing?

EV [00:45:10] Well, you put a face to the issue so that it is not data. It is not just theoretical. This is the face of the immigrant community or this is the face of the people that are in the pandemic. And these are the faces of the leaders who are fighting to change the situations even during this pandemic. One person that comes to mind is Father John Talson, who is in a very small community outside of Houston. And he gave courage to his leaders in standing before the city to fight for rent assistance, even for families who were undocumented. But it was in telling those stories and putting those faces in front of counsel that gave people hope that their situation could change. So, yes, storytelling is important.

LB [00:46:06] I was going to say, that sense of—often we can come out with all the data, have great technocratic explanations. But unless it's rooted in a story about actual people in their lives and then framing that within a bigger story, it's hard to connect to—these just become abstract problems rather than concrete issues.

EV [00:46:29] The challenge with media is that they always want to say, "Oh, ain't it awful"—and lifting families up as put in the story and saying, "Oh, ain't it awful"—versus saying this leader is connected with this broad-based power organization. And through that, they are making this change. They're not individuals out there. They are connected to institutions that are building power for change in their communities.

LB [00:46:56] So I think that's a broader—that's a very important point that often, then, the story that is told, even with the human face in a particular person, is an "ain't it awful?," "isn't this terrible"—"though the world's going to hell in a handcart" decline narrative story, whereas I think one of the key things in leadership and in organizing is framing things as a story of agency. We can act together. We can change. Here's someone who has both been personally transformed and has transformed their community. And that's a very different story. And I think that the holding up of those transformation stories and agency-centric stories, if you like, is very different from the kind of "ain't it awful" stories that generally circulate, which actually then reinforce a script that we

can't act together. We are only polarized. We cannot act to change our world. I can do nothing. I must wait for others to act on me rather than acting to confront and agitate and change what's happening to me.

EV [00:48:01] That's right. Yeah, they only tell a partial story. They don't want to tell the full story.

DM [00:48:05] I think that that's one of the things that distinguishes IAF organizing from some other kinds of organizing—it's the effort not to use people just to tug on other people's heartstrings, but to use real life stories to make real the issues that affect real people and to empower people to see that they can effect change in their lives.

LB [00:48:32] When you're developing leaders in the church or in organizing work, what are some of the personal dimensions that sometimes need to be addressed if people are going to have that sense of themselves as leadership and own that sense of their leadership?—that you have to address.

DM [00:48:49] The sense of giving people a sense of victory, giving them small things that they can achieve and be proud of before attempting to stretch them into larger arenas where they might fail—to say to folk, "It's not bad to write down what it is you want to say rather than speaking off the cuff." So giving people a sense of accomplishment, of winning—going from small victories then to the larger victories and then to the larger arena. And that's what's meant by accessibility and accountability and leadership. A leader has to be accessible to the persons that their leading and to all of the leadership they're attempting to develop. You have to make yourself available when people need and to encourage, to agitate them to understand that they can do more than they think they can do.

LB [00:49:58] Building on that, we've focused on leaders and training leaders. I want to switch now—you've trained many organizers as a leader in BUILD and elsewhere—what do you see as the key role of an organizer? What, in your view, is their job description?

DM [00:50:16] The key role of an organizer is to find leaders who can build an organization. That's the key role of the organizer—it's to go into a situation and discover leaders who can build the organization and to teach people how to do for themselves rather than doing it for them. It's being Jethro to people.

LB [00:50:39] Very well. Liz, what would you add to that in terms of how do—as an organizer, what do you see as the key role of the organizer?

F9 [00:50:47] Well, first of all, this is a profession. We tell people if you're looking for a job, don't come look at this. This is a profession like any other profession, like being a professor, being a pastor. And so that's number one. So it's a career for us. And it is about constantly finding talent and constantly being concerned about building relational power. Organizing is all reorganizing and disorganizing—it is constantly—and we move. Organizers move from one organization to another. That's how we learn to be organizers—better organizers. But it's constantly looking for leaders, constantly focusing on building relational power, and constantly looking at developing leaders and developing yourself as well. We call our organizations mini-universities of public life. And so we tell leaders and organizers to not learn any different. The same way we train organizers is the same way we train leaders. And so we're constantly reading, reflecting together, and holding ourselves accountable to fulfilling our goal of building power to bring about change in our communities.

DM [00:52:12] I think key to me looking at a person who's considering organizing is in the first meeting, my first encounter with that person. Is this a person who's curious about me? If a person has no curiosity about the persons that they're meeting with, they'll never make good organizers.

LB [00:52:34] Bishop Miles, what would you say? How would you characterize the difference, then, between an organizer and a leader? That's often a key distinction in organizing work. How would you see the difference between them?

DM [00:52:48] Basically, the difference between the organizer and the leader is that the organizer does it full time and the leader does it part time, and the organizer gets paid and is held accountable. [laughter] That's been my experience.

LB [00:53:06] Liz, what would you add?

EV [00:53:07] Well, the organizer is an agitator. We're constantly agitating—agitating people to act on their interests, agitating people to build relational power, agitating institutions to fulfill its mission.

LB [00:53:30] I think there's also a sense in which—and sometimes community organizing is criticized for this—there's an idea, there's a certain vision that democratic organizing has to be not simply spontaneous, but organic to a community, and the leaders have to emerge from that community. And if you have an organizer coming in from outside, they are an outside agitator and sometimes conservative forces criticize them for that. But also there are left wing and progressive critiques of that notion of an outside organizer or a professional organizer—that it's somehow not spontaneous and organic to a community's own leadership structures. My own view on that, and I'll be interested in both of you commenting on this, that there's a certain magic, then, that happens between an organizer coming in who's not part of the community, who doesn't necessarily—is not of that place or of that community's frame of reference or identified with it. But actually, their outsider status enables a certain agitation. And then there's a mutual learning that can take place between the organizer and the leaders from that place or from that particular community. And that is—there's something there in the nature of being an outsider and not just being from a place enables new perspectives and new action to happen. I wonder what, Bishop Miles, what do you think of that kind of relationship and how would you respond to what I've just said?

DM [00:55:09] I would take us to the story of Nehemiah going back to Jerusalem. He goes back as an outsider because he hasn't been there. It is the place of his people's origin, but he has grown up in the palace institution. But the first thing Nehemiah does when he goes back to Jerusalem is he goes out on his own and he looks at the situation with fresh eyes. Then he goes to those who are there and asked him, what do you want to do about this? You see what's going on just as well as I do. What do you want to do about this? And I think that that's the role of the organizer coming from the outside—it's bringing a fresh set of eyes that have not been dimmed by apathy, by the acceptance of what is, and who comes with the ability to challenge people to vision what can be if they're willing to invest.

LB [00:56:08] That's very, very helpful. That's very helpful indeed. So, Liz, in your experience, when does the relationship between organizers and leaders go well? What are the conditions of it

thriving? And where do it go badly? When does it go wrong? You must have seen both sides of that coin.

EV [00:56:27] When we stop agitating each other and holding ourselves accountable, where we mix public and private, where our relationships—because we work together so long that we learn more to be a private relationship versus a public relationship—because then there's no borders. There's no accountability. We begin to chitchat. We don't—we're not interested in developing others. We're just beginning to create this clique versus in a public relationship, we're holding each other accountable—where everything is above board. It is about building power. It's about not having stereotypes of a community. That's why I think it's also so important. If I would have stayed in organizing in South Texas, I would not be here today over thirty five years later, because we have a stereotype of community, we have a stereotype of people, and so our imagination dampens. We do not become curious and we don't hold each other accountable. So it was because I was able to move with my family, did I learn how to organize—because I was able to, as Bishop Miles says, to have a vision and imagination of what could be. It is like the general getting on top of the mountain and seeing what's below him or her and saying these are the possibilities. What if what if we build some power? Would these things change? And then taking it a step at a time. But it's about building power first. It's program before—it's not program before power. It is power before program.

LB [00:58:13] That's very helpful. And I think that crucial sense of mutual agitation and learning, constantly learning from from each other, going back and forth. So, I mean, here's another way into that question. But I'm interested how you both answer this. What do you think the difference is between a good organizer and a good priest or pastor? Liz, what do you say to that?

EV [00:58:37] Why don't we Bishop Miles to go first?! [laughter].

LB [00:58:43] I'm beginning with you. And I kind of—he's got vested interest in the answer to this.

EV [00:58:49] Well, a priest—I don't want to box a priest because a priest is also interested about their community, but they're interested about building that institution, about developing leaders within that institution. And the best of priests are pastors and organizers. They begin to see that to fulfill their mission, they got to be in relationship with others. So there are a lot of similarities between a good priest, a good pastor and a good organizer. And they learn from one another. And, as I said, they also then begin to agitate their congregations to fulfill their mission—to live by their mission. And that's similar to the work of an organizer with a broad-based IAF organization—it's to live by its mission, to hold each other accountable, to build relational power.

LB [00:59:56] Bishop Miles, how would you see the difference being a good organizer and a good pastor?

DM [01:00:01] I think that they have to have similar qualities. I think that what sometimes breaks down is that the organizer doesn't understand the self-interest of the priest or the pastor. And with that I mean that the priest or pastor not only has responsibilities within the democratic organization that's being built, but also maintaining and building the local institution. And I think it works best when organizers understand that part of the self-interest. Again, that's one of the things that attracted me to the IAF as a young pastor—was that the organizer came in and helped me to look at my institution and how it could be strengthened, because if my institution isn't

strong, then the overall organization can't be strong. So I think that the two roles are both vocations, and they have to have people who see their role as really a calling and not just as a job.

LB [01:01:07] I think you're right. I think I've certainly seen it go wrong when the organizer, in a sense, burns out leaders and just treats them as campaign fodder and isn't attentive to the flourishing and development of the institutions and congregations in membership. And it becomes a very one sided relationship when that happens. So, Liz, Bishop Miles, thank you so much for your time and energy and wisdom and great conversation about leadership and what it involves. I really appreciate this ability to talk it through with you. Thank you.

EV [01:01:46] It's an honor.

DM [01:01:46] Thank you for the opportunity.

LB [01:01:54] Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast in which I explored the role and nature of good leadership in democratic politics and congregational life, the different role of organizers and leaders in community organizing, and what it means to cultivate leadership in others. As with other episodes, there'll be suggestions for further reading in the show notes on the website. 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.