

## Episode 6: Institutions: Why They're Vital for Democratic Politics

[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. Central to this, however, are two other concerns.

[00:00:22] The first is to explore how organizing connects democracy and religious institutions, particularly at a local congregational level. The second is to examine how organizing embodies a distinctive vision and practice of democratic politics, one in which congregations, along with other local institutions, can play a key role. With its focus on institutions, this episode really addresses head on these two concerns. The podcast itself is a collaboration between the Industrial Areas Foundation or if Duke Divinity School and the Keenan Institute for Ethics building on the previous episodes on power and leadership. And as I already mentioned in this, the sixth episode in the series, I examine the place of institutions in organizing, discussing what is an institution, how and why they are central to the kind of democratic politics organizing undertakes. I'll be discussing these matters with Martin Trimble and Reverend Patrick O'Connor. Martin is co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation. He's directly responsible for the organizing work east of the Mississippi River, supervising and starting local IAF affiliates and recruiting and training organizers. He's organized for over 25 years on the ground with the IAF in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Washington, D.C., Virginia and North Carolina. Prior to organizing, Martin was the founding director of Opportunity Finance Network, which supports and provides standards for financial institutions that invest in affordable housing and community development work nationwide. Reverend Patrick O'Connor grew up and received his theological education in the West Indies. He is currently the lead pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, a multicultural congregation in the presbytery of New York City. He has served this congregation since 1992. And under his leadership, First Presbyterian is involved in the development of the Tree of Life, 74 million dollar, affordable, mixed income housing development that includes a community space and a health care facility. His leadership, though, extends beyond the congregation to the presbytery of New York City and the General Assembly of his denomination. And he's co-chair of the Metro Industrial Areas Foundation Leadership Team, chairman of Queens Power, a director of the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation and chairman of the first Jamaica Community and Urban Development Corporation, as well as being a member of the Board of Trustees of the Lewisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. So he brings a wealth of experience in running institutions and building coalitions between them. So look forward to talking to them and join me now on this.

[00:03:15] The Lesson Organize Act Portcullis. So Martin Trimble, Reverend Patrick O'Connor, it's fantastic to have you on the LISTEN organized Act podcast.

[00:03:32] Really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today about this very seemingly boring but also contested issue of institutions and their role in democratic politics.

[00:03:44] So I just want to begin, though, with a little bit about yourselves. And so beginning with you, Reverend O'Connor, can you tell me a little bit about where he grew up and how did you kind of encounter the world of organizing and get involved in organizing as a leader?

[00:03:59] I'm Patrick O'Connor. I was born in Kingston, Jamaica, and grew up in rural Jamaica. I'm a product of the Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, which really in our

community was the gift of a missionary endeavor where the Presbyterians believe that through creating institutions, they could strengthen the communities of folks took it and ran with it. I think that was a critical, formative experience. And then I had a boarding school experience where every level of the boarding school students learn to lead to run the institution. And so I think those are my two formative critical experiences.

[00:04:56] And so how did how did that you obviously became a figure here, a leader here in the states of Presbyterian churches. How how did the kind of connection to organize come about?

[00:05:10] When I came to First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica in nineteen ninety two. We wanted to be part of Queen Citizens organization. And then the fight was to create a high quality supermarket in southeast Queens. And, you know, in the black community, people were getting what I call D and E great food and we wanted an integrated supermarket and individuals on their own couldn't do it. But when the leaders of Quynh Citizens Organization came together, they were instrumental in getting the city of New York to purchase land from a big telephone company in NYNEX at the time, the need to the land for one dollar. And now we have one of the best supermarkets anywhere in Queens and Long Island created by institution and institution leaders.

[00:06:24] Right. Right. But it's so, Martin, tell me, where did you grow up and what was your movement into organizing?

[00:06:32] So I grew up in Philadelphia, born and raised there. My dad, who recently died in September, was an Episcopal priest, and my mom was the daughter of a first generation immigrant. My grandmother came to this country when she was 14 through Ellis Island and ended up in Dunkirk, New York, which is south of Buffalo. And I think both of them were really responsible for me being an organizing one. My dad had his entire ministry in the diocese of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, and during the civil rights movement, our bishop, Reverend Robert De Witt, helped lead the civil rights movement in Philadelphia.

[00:07:13] But I worshiped him as a leader and went to the first inaugural protest at Girard College, which, if you don't know it, is a city run boarding school in Philadelphia that was segregated.

[00:07:23] And so I think it was just in me and growing up in those in that era. So I think that was my my my background or the soil in which my commitment to organizing began to grow up.

[00:07:37] And so but you were involved in supporting community development and institutions who were investing in and lending to affordable housing schemes. And then you moved from that into the IAF. How did that come about?

[00:07:53] It really actually came about in my own revival of my own faith.

[00:07:58] But, you know, I moved back to Philadelphia after having been away about 10 years, and I joined a predominantly African-American Episcopal church in 18th and Diamond Streets, which is about 10 blocks from my house, ironically, actually bought a house right next to our college. And I used to walk to church and this was in the mid eighties. And Philadelphia was hemorrhaging people and jobs and. The neighborhood watch, which our church was located, was surrounded by forty thousand abandoned

homes, the only functioning institution in the neighborhood was the church, the local public school, and about 12 blocks away, Temple University, which is holding on for its life.

[00:08:41] And in the midst of that, I was making loans to for affordable housing and daycare and things like that.

[00:08:47] And I just realized that, no, North Philly wasn't poor because it didn't have an access, access to credit didn't have power.

[00:08:56] And then my pastor, father, Isaac Miller, who had been the chaplain at Morehouse and a student activist there, invited me to a meeting with Mike Gecan, who had come down from New York to explore whether it be possible to know is there any appetite in Philly to organize. And then I rediscovered my agency and my own political science and faith actually write that to them and coming together in a wonderful way.

[00:09:23] So it's a reverend kind of let me you've you've spoken a very wonderfully about the kind of importance of institutions in your formation.

[00:09:32] Tell me a little bit about a kind of some key institutions that very specific institutions that that have shaped you and how you've come to think about what is an institution? How do you how do you define that term?

[00:09:47] I think the church in Jamaica and the church here in the US has made me into the person I am, both in terms of faith and values, but also teach him about the power of relationships and the power of community to create change, to create opportunities for people. My folks grew up poor, and yet the church and specifically the Presbyterian Church, promoted education as a way of moving forward. You know, here in New York City, I have seen that when black folks were shut out of multiple institutions, churches were there as a place where people could not only grow in their faith development, but grow in their personal and professional development. The organization with other leaders and building relationships create opportunities for themselves and their children and the extended community. So the church has been the foundational institution, but.

[00:11:13] Right, so that it provides in some ways a place to stand in a context where constantly your ability to act for yourself and with others is being taken away from you or, you know, not being recognized until the church provides this both kind of physical, legal and social space in which you can act with and for others, and also a place in which you really build power.

[00:11:41] I think, you know, the the dilution of religion that has that's occurring now is that it's an individualistic personal pursuit. But the whole if you go back to the days of the scriptures and the days of Jesus, he he created a community and through the community, they had power. And the power of the community was a threat to Rome and to the world at that time. And so Christians saw themselves as not just individual servants of God, but that as a community working together, they could do transformation in the world. And so in the end, in my foundations, I think the church has given me that sense of value and the idea that it's not individual power, but it is collective power that matters so much intensity.

[00:12:54] But so can you give me can you. Do you have, like, a pithy definition of a of an institution? How would you how would you define that?

[00:13:02] Yeah. So I have to go to a positive both. Very brief. I actually went to Webster's Dictionary and the definition of an institution is a significant practice relationship or organization in a society or culture.

[00:13:20] So I think that includes family. It includes religions to. Lucian's educational institutions, our governmental institutions, obviously, we have business institutions as well, but I think at their best at least, I think about my own life and the organizing I do. I think that their centers of power to enable people to make change consistent with their values and their centers of formation.

[00:13:47] Right, or people learn who they are, what tradition they're part of, what are the values that ought to rule and margin their life? In my case, what's the justice that I'm committing my life to, to try to achieve in some small measure?

[00:14:07] And when I look at academic institutions like Reverend O'Connor, I am who I am today as an organizer because of the Episcopal Church, the advocate.

[00:14:17] My moment, so one of the ways I kind of think about this is, is institutions at one, a key feature of institutions is they're tools for solving collective problems and then pursuing over time, in many ways transgenerational be the kind of goods necessary to sustain a common life. And hopefully that common life is just in general. And obviously institutions go wrong when they're pursuing kind of unjust and tyrannical forms of life. But but that that sense then of institutions that allow us together to seek goods that we need to survive, let alone thrive. And then also that that is enabled over time.

[00:15:02] It's kind of a way of pooling and transmitting collective wisdom about about how we can act and together to solve these shared problems, whether it's, you know, in your father's case, Reverend O'Connor, the kind of questions around farming and agriculture that he was engaged in or, you know, the the questions of education or the need for food or whatever it is. These are these are these are some of the kind of broader collective problems we face. And how do we come together to to address them? Does that do you think that either of you, that kind of your sense that helps kind of shed light on your sense of what institutions are about?

[00:15:37] You know, and also, you know, there are places which teach people how to Whitlam. Right. You know, with my congregation and I serve has members who came from the South during the Great Migration, has people who migrated from the Caribbean, from West and East Africa, from Central America. We're pretty diverse. The common story, even though people came from different places, is that even when conditions are hard, you go through oppressive circumstances, that if you're nurtured by an institution, you can wear, you know, some of the women in my congregation tell me what it meant not to be able to use a restroom, you know, to to have to work in somebody's house, but use an old house because you were not permitted to use any facility in the main building and their commitment through their churches to when they came to New York to become homeowners, to strive for raising their families a certain way, nurtured by churches, which said you're not defined by how people saw you. This is how God sees you. So you have an aspiration to win and to create a certain quality of life for yourself and your family.

[00:17:22] So to me, that's very helpful. Martin, could you speak a bit more then? I mean, I think, Reverend, give a wonderful sense then of the central city of institutions to kind of creating forms of self-determination and over and against those systems and structures which would take that away. Can you speak a bit more to the place, the centrality? Why

why do institutions matter for democratic politics so much? Because we tend to think of democracy as kind of one person, one vote, but think about it in quite individualistic terms. But one of the central insights of of organizing is that institutions matter. If democracy is going to go well, can you just expand on that and give us a bit of the rationale for that?

[00:18:06] Well, I mean, you know, Democratic politics is about power. And there are three major actors in the in the political arena, the government sector, the corporate sector and then everybody else and those sectors have very large, very powerful institutions.

[00:18:31] Can you just give us a story or example of how this works out in practice?

[00:18:36] So on the Sunday after Easter in 2008, I drove to First Baptist Church, Manassas, for what I thought was going to be a small 20 person house meeting of homeowners who lived within walking distance of Georgetown South, which is a sprawling eight hundred unit townhome community, because people have been complaining about losing their homes to foreclosure. And in Virginia, you know, you you can lose your home in two weeks. They send you a foreclosure notice and it's a property rights state and the clock starts ticking. Not when you comes the notice comes to your house is when they stamp it at the office. So people are just losing their houses right and left as the economy was collapsing. And I pulled into the parking lot and it was jammed there.

[00:19:30] Over three hundred people there desperate with stories of being on the phone or landline at the same time trying to negotiate forbearance on one line and being told on the other line that their house had been foreclosed and they had to be out into two days and folks wanted to talk to a housing counselor. And fortunately, we had trained a team of leaders at at First Baptist to start listening.

[00:20:01] We began hearing the conspiracy between the of the banks to write mortgages that that were predestined to fail. And there was no government owes a huge government deregulation that allowed the mortgage industry to write these kinds of mortgages.

[00:20:24] JPMorgan Chase and all written mortgages that put people in variable rate mortgages with a floor couldn't go below seven percent, but there was no ceiling. So immediately people's interest rates went up and they lost their houses and they had no way to fight back.

[00:20:41] And so voice the IAF organization came together and ran an action on Senator Mark Warner, who at the time in a Democratically controlled Congress, was a key member of the House Banking Committee and was widely covered by The Washington Post.

[00:20:57] We personalized it on Jeff Immelt and Brian Moynihan and Jamie Dimon.

[00:21:05] And then literally the next day, Reverend Clyde Ellis and I from at Baptist Church flew down to Charlotte to attend the annual meeting of Bank of America, supported by the IAF organizations in North Carolina. I don't know what I think was providence. God, God intervened in this day because there's usually a time when the annual shareholders meetings where they magnanimously call for shareholder input. And Reverend Ellis stood up with two very large file cases of homeowners loan applications or applications for refinancing in his arms that people hadn't gotten any answer to for 90 days.

[00:21:53] So Reverend Ellis, a retired major in the Army, rose to the microphone and looked up at Brian Moynihan and said, Mr. Moynihan, I learned two things in the military.

You can delegate authority, but you can't delegate responsibility. So I'm here to ask you, will you take responsibility for my people of Prince William County who are losing their homes by the thousands? Because I want you to know.

[00:22:30] I didn't give twenty five years of my life to defend this behavior, and Moynihan was flustered, he didn't know what to do.

[00:22:41] All of his board is watching.

[00:22:44] And within five seconds, he turned to Reverend Ellis and said, I pledge to you that I will make things right in Prince William County.

[00:22:55] Here's the person who reports directly to me who's going to work with you. That led to over two hundred and fifty million dollars of principal reduction. Thousands of people homes were saved, an investment of 15 million dollars in affordable housing and another investment of two million dollars in an equity fund to help us restore homeownership.

[00:23:21] So that's the key thing there is. You've got this powerful alliance between state and market.

[00:23:29] The individual outside of institutions is naked before the then tirelli, subject to how they're acted upon by the state and market.

[00:23:39] It's only in institutions and in then coalitions of those institutions coming together can then you have the agency and capacity to force change and bring accountability for how state and market are acting to actually denude us in this case of the very conditions of shelter and a basic basic needs, because we've done a good power analysis in order to fight back against institutions that have so much more power than we do, we have to build our own power.

[00:24:11] And every institution has a little bit of power. They organize people and money every week.

[00:24:18] And as Reverend O'Connor indicated, when you aggregate those institutions, you exponentially increase the power that's available to the members of those institutions to fight back against banks or utilities or a corrupt police department or a government agency that refuses to address food deserts in Queens.

[00:24:43] But can I ask you, I mean, you've touched on this already, but can you say a little bit more about the kind of central city, particularly in black struggles for liberation of the of the church and give some sense of the history of of that? That's I think that's a that's a very key example of being talking about.

[00:25:04] So let me give you a story from from Southeast Queens, where in the early 2000s, through one of our IAF organizations, we discovered when we asked what were some of the issues affecting you, that many homeowners had homes where when it rained, there was water in their basements, their cars got flooded. But it turned out that the market and government had collaborated to create this situation for about six hundred thousand residents. One of our leaders had bought had worked hard, bought himself a nice car, and the car got flooded and he got sick of it and he and others of our leaders decided to organize. Now, initially, when we started the process, there were maybe around 15, 20 issues identified or or places where the flooding occurred. The more we talked with

our leaders across our institutions, we were able to discover that this wasn't just an isolated, small problems, but that multiple people were experiencing it. So our leaders created a map and put pinholes, you know, those colored pins on the map of Southeast Queens. And then they said, well, since the banks and the construction industry had collaborated with government who had the power to cause this problem, who had the power to fix it, we discovered that the Department of Environmental Protection in New York City had a one point two billion dollar budget and that they were responsible for storm water and sewage. And so our leaders, led by the man who had his name, was Deacon Oliver, who had the flooding in this car and another woman. Name Keisha, who had the flooding in her basement. We went to the Department of Environmental Protection and Luke because you have had this church experience, the the second in command at the EPA told us this wasn't their problem. This was God's problem because God built the aquifer so that the aquifer drained into the black community.

[00:27:59] That's why the flooding hitting me. He actually said that. He said that our leaders were incensed.

[00:28:09] I was incensed by it. But to the credit of the out. But they can't all of us said we're here. We're with the people who have the power to change this. And he said, you should tell them that God sent you here.

[00:28:30] And the discussion sure changed from.

[00:28:35] All right. What a stupid comment. We're here because we want something to be done. At that time, there was a commissioner by the name of Emily Lloyd, who was the boss of the deputy commissioner, who said, we're going to do something about this.

[00:28:57] You know, through our institutions, our leaders created more sites where there was flooded storm drains, streets, basements, and she committed publicly to make the investment.

[00:29:16] And so far, about two billion dollars has been spent to create to change a 40 year problem, not because one person preached from the pulpit, but because we taught our leaders the power, both of relationships and through relationships to create power. And there's a tangible change in their lives.

[00:29:41] So there's something there's something there very important about how it's it's not just the sheer fact of the existence of institutions, but it's organized institutions. It's institutions coming together. They've both got the connection on the ground. What is happening? What's the flooding? What where is it that they're able to kind of build that meaningful picture? Because the real relationship to these people in this place at this time, but then also that it becomes the conduit then to go forward and identify the things in this case in the government who are local government, who have the power to to change things and that something there. You've got the horizontal relations between institutions organized, the roots in the community, and then also the ability to transmit that into vertical relations in either addressing kind of corporate sector or government.

[00:30:37] So that's a I think is a very helpful kind of story of opening out how institutions are operating in that space somewhere between the market sector, the state sector, and what we might call kind of civil society or the third sector.

[00:30:51] And the third sector isn't there. The other two don't have to do anything. While we were doing this flooding campaign and the politicians, we're just talking. But they had talked for 40 years, right. Nothing happened until our leaders claim their power and decided to act more Luke.

[00:31:16] I would observe that whether it's Jesse Jackson declaring that to people in a democracy, that you are somebody.

[00:31:26] I am somebody. They're being taught in their institutions that they are the children of God or they are the you know, the the inheritors of a democracy in a union. Right. That you are a person and you have dignity and you have rights.

[00:31:41] And the challenge that we that those institutions that organizing put back on them is, OK, let's organize and build the power to demand those rights, because without power and institutions and said they don't exist, rights are just an abstraction.

[00:32:01] So we can have these kind of notions of rights. But but unless they realize through shared political action, this is kind of Alinsky point, then these rights are just notional.

[00:32:11] They never and as we see in her own experience under the Nazis, they just disappear into thin air unless you've got the power through organized institutions to actually ensure that those those rights are living things and the kind of the institutions provide the the means then. Of of cultivating and handing on those kind of things like freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, but if we we can have notions of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, but unless they're embedded, unless people are able to act together in some kind of institutional form, then those are just kind of abstract commit. They're tokenistic or symbolic and they don't actually do any work in the world right now.

[00:32:55] So to just march into the building on their like, can you say some of the characteristic? Because we we can use this term institutions generically.

[00:33:04] But can you say some of the characteristics then of the differences between the institutions in the third sector or civil society sector and those in the kind of market sector and those in the government sector? Like, what would you say some of the characteristic differences between between how institutions operate and their commitments and goals in those different arenas?

[00:33:27] Yeah, I think it's based on interests. The interests of the market sector is very clear. It's to maximize profit. Right. How does the market sector view people? They're an expense if you're trying to maximize profit, you do as much as you can through efficiency to eliminate that expense.

[00:33:46] People are expendable and increasingly the government sector and I think we've seen this throughout our history, there have been points where in our history where government actually has been an agent of the interests of families and ordinary citizens, whether it's during the New Deal or certain points during the civil rights movement and the like.

[00:34:07] But no, there's the collusion between government and the market sector to pursue the market sector's interests and maximize the market sector's interest.

[00:34:18] I mean, this is repeated throughout our history from slavery to what we see happening with large financial institutions now. So there's the government sector jet has been corrupted by that relationship, I think.

[00:34:37] And so it's really the third or civic sector and their institutions, they're directly connected to people who have to organize to fight for the interests of ordinary people. That's the only hope that we have.

[00:34:51] And I think that's our job in the IAF, which is to try to rebuild that civic sector that.

[00:34:57] So there's that sense of the you've got specific issues, concrete issues to try to address. But the kind of broader frame, along with a whole host, we can put in social movements or other kind of forms of democratic politics there. But the reweaving of civil society, the reweaving of this kind of institutional ecology, which actually provides some break and resistance then to the dominance of either being treated, as you say, is expendable or in the banking sector as simply a commodity or kind of you get to extract value from and then in in the government sector being treated simply as a kind of administrative unit which inherently individualize is and must treat everyone simply as a kind of item on a governmental statistic. And that sense of how the role of institutions in the civic sector as taking seriously, that we are persons in relation with where we receive who we are and our dignity through the quality and character of our relations with people and the prioritization of society over and against either market considerations or governmental administrative considerations that that that's key to democratic life.

[00:36:13] And Luke, if I might just say in our and just a concept that people matter, that, you know, I'm not just a unit, but that I have ideas, I have a real experience, and I have solutions to some of the things that challenge us in in my years with the idea of the power of the experience has been seen. Leaders come up with solutions to issues which impact to them and affect them, because often that it's the policies that have come down from on high.

[00:37:01] They're not actually attentive to the lived real experience. It tends to kind of treat people as these in these kind of unit terms. And and that that sense then of actually paying attention to the people affected by policies they have wisdom to share, to talk to about the conditions under which they live and work, and then but to get people to listen, it takes agitation, it takes organizing, it takes working together to do that.

[00:37:28] Can I can I just use the word respect? And just just the concept of starting with respect is the foundation of being able to create real relationships and real power by so, so much to just get building on that.

[00:37:44] Can you talk a little bit about, I mean, the other approaches to organizing focus specifically on neighborhoods? Some obviously unions focus on the workplace. You know, some of the policies focus on families is the unit and kind of organized people around that.

[00:38:01] Can you talk a little about how and why I came to focus specifically on institutions and and why that is? And obviously, churches have been key institutions in that to why, in your view, do institutions matter? And we've kind of talked about this a little bit already, but but why do institutions matter for community organizing specifically?

[00:38:23] I think three reasons. They're centers of power. It's you know, they organize people and money. And when you aggregate those institutions, you exponentially expand the power that people have to go up against, you know?

[00:38:37] The institutions in the market and government sector that are pressing their families and as Reverend O'Connor said, these are institutions that ordinary people lead and own. It's there they exercise agency through them and then their centers of values, they have a vision for justice. The church hasn't most churches how long as first Jamaica been at its current location?

[00:39:04] 60 and 62. Wow.

[00:39:07] They're generational with the same vision of justice, you know, across generations doing pursuing it in different ways. So I think those are the reasons that we and I not just and then it's where leaders are developed to, but whereas trying to organize folks, disparate individuals is just hugely, hugely problematic. What's the glue that holds them together?

[00:39:38] And is this institutional affiliation?

[00:39:41] So we've been talking quite is a danger. We might paint a kind of overly rosy picture of institutions. We've been quite booster Bistriz about about them. Um, this is this is slightly academic distinction, but I think it's a helpful one.

[00:39:58] The philosopher Alistair Macintyre makes this distinction between institutions and practices and practices need institutions to sustain them. For example, education and the goods it serves is sustained by a school or a university. Likewise, the practice of medicine is obviously sustained over time by the use of the hospital. But Macintyre points to how institutions, while necessary, often become the enemy of good practice. They seek the external goods of money, power status that keep the institution going and in pursuit of these ECan often end up undermining good practice. For example, external interests of the hospital makes medicine all about profit, not about promoting health. What do you make of this distinction and where do you see it played out in organizing it? Or how can organizing help address it?

[00:40:44] But if I begin with you, I mean, I think it exemplifies the universal that we teach the world as it is and the world as it should be, and the tension that we confront in organizing and we're trying to move the world as it should be, towards the world as it is towards the world, as it should be. Right. Institutions are flawed, but they're necessary and important to our democracy. So when Durham can took up the fight to hold a mirror up to Duke University around the wages that it paid, it's it's essential workers. It was challenging Duke to ask itself. Was it is it living up to its values? And if we hadn't had the power to be able to do that, we couldn't help reform that institution. So I think we're pretty realistic, at least I'm realistic about it. I don't look at institutions and with rose colored glasses, there's always that tension there.

[00:41:44] You know, I, I think something that I have teaches, which is often hard for institutions, is a concept of this disorganized and reorganization that most institutions were put together to address a particular set of circumstances, and that after a while you can become so focused on your existence without without having a sense of mission and purpose. And what what good organization does is that it forces you to ask why do we exist? And sometimes it means. Changing course in a in a in a totally different way and

moving in a new direction in the case of my own particular congregation. You know, when I came here twenty eight years ago, we were all inwardly focused, just one of my colleagues called navel gazing that we're so wonderful and we exist for ourselves. And most of the money was spent to make it comfortable for those who were in the institution. And we weren't related to the community or the neighborhood and the the provocation of organized. And sometimes it wasn't easy because they organized, you know, looks and said, you know, you're wasting your time and you're useless into tonight's punch and I don't want you to have too much editing, so I won't put out a word. But, you know, it it it it made me wrestle with the why. And I think over the journey, the practice of being able to listen listen to people within your institution, listen to people in your neighborhood, listen to what colleagues in other institutions are experiencing and going through is fundamental to having relevant institutions in our case. You know, I keep saying to old folks, there's a reason why we have to disappear. Because there are many good institutions which became irrelevant, couldn't pivot and disappeared.

[00:44:29] No, I think that point about remaining relevant through listening to the realities of people's lives is comes into the rule. And the first rule of organizing is in organizing is, in the first instance, disorganizing. Obviously, these are wonderful examples of positive institutions. I think there's a sense in which often, though and I have certainly experiences in the church, we see it in unions. We see in a lot of institutions NGOs where the institution and the membership of the institution, in a sense, are made to serve the interests of the office holders rather than their interests and what it means for them as members of that institution to flourish.

[00:45:12] And so the whole thing kind of either gets very focused on a charismatic leader or a single figure or becomes a kind of procedural process where we're just doing things, you know, to fulfill certain kind of bureaucratic commitments rather than there being any kind of living life and a shared sense of of that that that industry is being owned by its membership and serving its members and their interests.

[00:45:39] What are some of the ways when we when we end up with those kinds of institutions, we can kind of agitate them? And one of the some of the ways in which they get broken out, they get disorganized so they can be reorganized around the genuine membership. What are some of what some of the tools for that that you've learned and some examples of of of how that has been done?

[00:46:01] Organization teaches accountability, religious institutions don't want to name accountability, and yet all the life is has accountability connected with it. You know, we we use nice words like stewardship, stewardship, champions, but we don't want accountability. So a part of it is looking for people who have an appetite for life and vibrancy, who are willing to be accountable, and then who have the discipline to realize that it's just to get anything to work. You have to put in the time and the energy and the effort to make it work. And they're going to be setbacks on the journey. But if you if you keep grinding at it, you get somewhere. You know, we we have a lot of folks now who because we are in this instant to think, well, if I blessed, it means it's going to be successful.

[00:47:15] I'm not going to prosperity gospel. That's a reference. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:47:20] So I also think that we're past we're in a post denominational era, but that what really people are looking for is vital institutions.

[00:47:36] Does this institution listen to me? Is it committed to or is it committed to building real relationships with me?

[00:47:47] All right.

[00:47:47] But I think one of our one of our kind of crises of the moment is, in a sense, we've kind of lost our institutional imagination where we, you know, it seems incredibly tiresome and boring to turn up on a rainy Thursday evening to to kind of sort out the parish finance committee. That just seems an unimaginable heavy weight to bear to to to to to to many folk. But I think this this kind of there is this broader crisis. You know, in many ways we can find good people. We can raise money. There's there's lots of creative ideas out there. But but there's this kind of crisis of trust in institutions and institutions that they're racist or they're patriarchal or they're oppressive in some way. And we can't, in a sense, imagine the institutions we need to address and solve the problems we face.

[00:48:40] You know, we we know we have to educate children, but there's basic disagreements about what schools are for, how what to teach, how to train teachers. And so how would you how do we cultivate a renewal of institutional imagination and and what might that look like?

[00:48:58] Somebody has a bad experience with one institution and uses it to paint everybody. You know, as I tell my members, I said, listen, if your judgment by one day, then you're not being fair to me, those who are committed to being in relationship.

[00:49:19] Realize that over time there is much greater benefit to being in relationship than whatever might happen in an isolated incident. Now, to be honest, in the in the time in which we live, an individual incident can become so publicized that it makes people not want to deal with you. So there has to be a commitment to engage it.

[00:49:55] And, you know, I'm worried about the people who only get their connections through a gadget because it means somebody is feeding you something that you only know a really small slice about that person because you have not really spent time relate to them.

[00:50:17] But I think I mean, I think one of the key things goes back to what you were saying before.

[00:50:21] Every of the it's this it's this combination of accountability and relationship. If we just have a relationship that obviously can be exploited, it's when there's there is meaningful commitment to to to ongoing engaged relationship combined with openness, accessibility and accountability on the path of leadership and those those with power in an institution. And that's where I think that's that's often people are being asked to make a commitment to an institution. But the people in charge of the institution are neither accessible nor accountable. And that's a disaster. And I think that is the combination of both both of those things coming together.

[00:51:07] And so to a great point, Luke, you know, one of the things that we teach and if there's a difference between public and private relationships with which is which is important, I say to my members, all right, you know, most pastors would like your members to really like you. But as well, you know, it's a daily occurrence, right? You know, something happens and you may not like me, but because we are in this public relationship, you you should know I'm going to show up and do what's needed with you

and your family. And I'm expecting the same of you. Some will have good days when when it's easy. And we have days where. It's it's hard, you know, one of the things for me when it works is when. When I have to show up, because I understand that this is a public relationship and some of the suspicion of institutions has broken down because people want a private relationship from a public institution.

[00:52:30] Right. That's key to Martin. If we if we go, we can kind of build vibrant institutions.

[00:52:37] Obviously, we talked about earlier the importance of kind of being broad based and building relationship between institutions. And obviously a central task then of organizing is building these links so they can collaborate together toward shared ends. Can you kind of comment on how that's done and what do you think makes for a strong coalition of institutions?

[00:53:02] I mean, I think the bedrock, the foundation for that is the slow patient work of organizing, which is meeting with, talking to, beginning to establish a public relationship with and understanding the interests of. Other institutional leaders and trying to figure out, is there a common ground, is there some shared anger about what you'd like to see changed? And if so, is there understanding that I can't do it by myself? We've got to come together collectively if we're going to address the affordable housing problem in Queens, not want none. None of us can do it alone. And then can you can you forge a measure of trust over time? Because there has to be earned and in action where you can take on really hard battles and also establish reciprocity. Right. In in that relationship. Right. Because not every issue that every organization takes on is the issue of everybody who's in the organization that everybody understands that if you show up for me, quid pro quo, I'm going to show up for you. But it's not just that transaction. It's I believe in you. I know you. I know this. Why this is so important to you.

[00:54:23] And and I'm willing to stand with you and I think with power and probably say more about this than I could say a little bit about what we've done in our most recent new organization in North Carolina and Wake County.

[00:54:36] One wake, but it was with hundreds of individual meetings or thousands of individual meetings and with institutional leaders beginning to create a vision of what could be that what that was not yet.

[00:54:51] Reverend, can I just say so? I mean, you've you're you're part of Presbyterian Church. There's a kind of narrative decline that often accompanies mainline denominations. And can you say something about both? On the one hand, the kind of you you've kind of cultivated, a church that's gone through a congregation has gone through quite big changes and now, as you said, is a kind of multicultural church. Can you say something about the particular journey of how you've negotiated, nurtured that change in the institution that you have charge of? But then more broadly, what kind of lessons for mainline denominational churches do you think organizing has in terms of congregational development, healthy institutions?

[00:55:40] You know, I let me go back to to Jamaica when I came to seminary. You know, Karl Barth, Kirkegaard were really big in my mind. And I went into the pulpit and tried to speak about them. And after three weeks, three congregants who looked at me and said, son, I was trying I was trying to years old. And that said, well, that may work at the

seminary in Kingston, but you're not relating to us. So if you want to do that, you won't be here for.

[00:56:30] But that's accountability. Self-interest ought to be here.

[00:56:34] If you want to be here, we can help you and we will teach you how to pass to people. And we had an arrangement where particular days for the week, I went with two of them and they introduced me to people and took me around. So I learned that when you try to do anything in a congregation, the foundation of it is relationships. And then you got to do the work. And the work is, you know, in the reform tradition, we said reform, always reform. And so, you know, I'm always asking, God, what should we be doing now in know, I would call it this organization and we organize. And it's a constant process in the context of the Presbyterian Church. The seminaries would do well in finding other ways of preparing people for ministry. Apart from just good traditional theological education. Most pastors do understand what power is. They don't understand the difference between a problem and an issue, and they don't understand what it means to leave.

[00:58:03] And that if there's nobody following you, there's a there's also a political theorist friend of mine is doing some work around Jeremiah and the shift from General.

[00:58:20] I one to JEREMI 29 and this sense of Gerima won what's called on, there's this constant motif of kind of build client marry and TerraMar 29. But Jeremi one, there's a sense of they have to lose the temple, the priests and the land, which is really what makes them who they are before they can hear the new thing, which is, you know, in Babylon, this terrible place, they're in exile. Two of Bill can't marry. And so before the new thing could come to be, there's this profound loss. And I think that's having the courage to ask in our churches or in any institution, you know, what are our temples, what are our land, what are our priests that seems so central to who we are that actually we have to give up if we're going to be renewed and be reformed in your say and then to new forms of life. I think that's a very deep challenge in the moment. That is a spiritual pastoral challenge as well as a kind of understanding one's context as well.

[00:59:25] You're the guest preacher for next Sunday.

[00:59:31] I was Reverend O'Connor. Martin, it's been great talking to you here on their and organize podcast and this very rich conversation about institutions. Really appreciate your time with me today.

[00:59:51] Thank you for joining me for this episode of this organized act podcast in which I explored the role of local institutions in democratic politics, why institutions are key to sustaining basic freedoms, and how organizing builds relationship between institutions to develop broad based coalitions to address issues of shared concern and generate meaningful democratic change.

[01:00:18] As with other episodes, there'll be suggestions for further reading that you can download from the show notes on the website. That's [www.ormondcenter.com](http://www.ormondcenter.com) backslash Listen-Organize- Act- podcast. Do sign up at the website for news about events and resources related to the podcast or to send me questions.

[01:00:44] 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.

