

Agitate Or Irritate

A Cultural Question

Eugene Williams III

Agitation has become a staple- community organizing tactic. African American practitioners should think long and hard before embracing it as their own. Adopting another culture's paradigms means adopting the good, bad and the ugly. Agitating African American faith-based and community leaders is problematic. It is often perceived as irritating, confrontational, combative and disrespectful. Recruitment and relationship building opportunities are diminished. Advancing community organizing within African American congregations suffers as a consequence.

Humility and artful probing are more effective tactics. Humility communicates respect. Artful probing promotes reflection, contemplation and discovery. Advancing community organizing is a long term benefit.

Eugene Williams III

I recently attended a community organizing training session in Chicago. One of the training themes- agitation, was deeply troubling from a cultural perspective. The trainers intended to communicate the tactical importance of agitating a perspective leader to think differently. Ultimately to join their organizing network. Unfortunately, what was communicated to many African American clergy attendees was arrogance, callousness and disrespect. One attendee, Rev. Nobel Ford, commented, " I was initially intrigued by

the possibility of my church joining this organizing network. But after this, I would not let my people get anywhere near this group. If one of my members tried to come into our church and use this tactic on me or any other members of my church I would escort them to the door. Black churches do not operate this way. This line of thinking is totally disrespectful." Another minister echoed Noble's concern, "The organizer in my session used Eddie Vrdolyak as a good example of someone that understood agitation and self interest. He proudly said that Vrdolyak would have people waiting in a hallway for a personal audience. And when it was your turn to meet him his only question was-- what do you want." "Eddie Vrdolyak was a racist Alderman that played racial politics against Mayor Harold Washington. Somebody ought to tell the organizer that agitation is disrespectful and using Vrdolyak as a good example suggests that this network thinks that racism is a good organizing tool."

Agitation is not a universal tactic. It may be of use with some ethnic groups but not others. Two reasons support this contention: 1) two people can view the same thing very differently, 2) organizers from certain ethnic groups may experience short term gains by using the tactic, but African American organizers do not have that luxury.

The use of roots and herbs for medicinal purposes is an example. In some cultures

people that used roots and herbs as cures were considered healers. In other cultures people that used roots and herbs as cures were considered witches and were burned on a stake.

Cultural dynamics play a major part in how organizers are received. When a self-confident organizer from the predominant culture approaches an African American pastor her or she is often perceived as knowledgeable or self-assured. A self-confident African American with equal knowledge and skills approaching an African American pastor in the same fashion runs the risk of being viewed as cocky or self-righteous. Likewise, if an African American organizer approaches many pastors of the predominant culture self-confidently, he or she is often viewed as overconfident or brash. Even organizers of other ethnic groups have a bit more leeway when approaching African American pastors than do African American organizers. The point is not to paintbrush or over-generalize. Rather to illustrate a cultural dynamic that often plays out to the detriment of African American organizers when they choose to adopt the agitation-tactic.

*"When I think of a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone; "It means just what I choose it to mean- neither more nor less."
"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master- that is all."*

-Alice in Wonderland

Words are defining. Context and perception determine definition. Webster's definition of agitation is: to make someone troubled or nervous. To whisk, churn, or beat. The definition of irritation is to make someone annoyed, impatient, or angry. To aggravate; pain, hurt; chafe, abrade, scratch, rasp.

Should an organizer seek to make a potential leader troubled or nervous? Does the organizer desire to whisk, churn, beat, irritate or aggravate a pastor or leader? Some community organizers in the predominate culture answer in the affirmative. Cultural perceptions of power and superiority inform such thinking.

Agitation junkies might achieve short term gain but experience long term pain if they adopt this tactic with African Americans. One may experience a quick, power-fix. But as with any drug, what goes up must come down. Doors will close. Phone calls will stop being returned. Atrophy eventually sets in with those leaders that are intrigued enough to take an initial plunge into organizing. Considerable evidence supports this contention.

African American clergy face a multitude of daily pressures in their churches that agitate the heck out of them. African American leaders work (or seek work) in a hostile environment that agitates them every day. The last thing they need is agitation from an organizer that desires something from them--namely their time and resources for community organizing purposes.

One might ask, if not agitation then what? Artful probing is a more effective tactic. To

probe means to seek to uncover information about someone or something, an investigation, inquiry or examination. An exchange between Jesus and his disciples illustrates the point.

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

Matt. 16:13- 17

Jesus artfully probes his disciples. The disciples reflect and contemplate. Peter reveals the answer. Jesus affirms Peter. It validates the disciples. Jesus' mission is advanced.

Jesus could have taken a different tact. He could have said, hey guys, you all have been with me longer than anybody else. Have you not yet figured out who I am? Peter what do you think? Any of you guys, give me an answer. The first example is artful probing. The other is agitating.

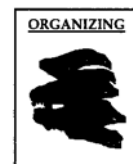
Is this semantics or word-smithing? Hardly not. African American community organizers must remember that African American

pastors possess extensive organizing experience. Many have honed in their skills by organizing (founding) and/or reorganizing their churches. Teaching their members agitation as a tactic or using agitation to motivate poses significant problems. It can conjure up images of membership insurrection, disrespect, confrontation or immaturity.

Humbly asking probing questions is far more effective. Humility is critical because it communicates the organizers' respect for pastor or leader. Probing questions affords the interviewee opportunity to reflect. The organizer can guide the interview. Probing creates contemplation rather than confrontation. The more skillful an organizer becomes, the greater feel he or she will possess. Healthy tension can be created also.

Advancing community organizing in African American congregations is essential. Strategies and tactics must be well-conceived. Cultural respect is a mandate. Failure to select the proper strategies and tactics will adversely affect the ultimate objective. For these reasons African Americans community organizers should strongly consider the consequences of using agitation as a tactic in organizing African American congregations.

Eugene Williams III is National Organizing Director of RCNO



All Rights Reserved, 2008