Panel Notes
Morning Panel #5: Finding the Uncommon Common Ground
Organizing across Race, Place, and Faith
From the Ashes: The 1992 Civil Unrest and the Rise of Social Movement Organizing
USC Davidson Conference Center
April 26, 2012

Description: Out of the civil unrest, new forms of civic engagement developed: neighborhood councils in 1999, an increase in faith-based engagement, and new social movement organizing. This session features panelists from different efforts to engage multiple racial, ethnic, and immigrant identities from the ground-up. Panelists will share their experiences and insights into the successes and challenges in organizing across difference and what it takes to build a common agenda.

Moderator: Michele Prichard, Liberty Hill Foundation

Panelist:
- Carlos Vaquerano, Salvadoran American Leadership & Educational Fund
- BongHwan Kim, Los Angeles City Department of Neighborhood Empowerment
- Gloria Walton, Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education
- Richard Flory, USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture

EDITED TRANSCRIPTION

Michelle: This panel will cover new forms of civic engagement and community. Most of the workshops are trying to learn the lessons of the last 20 years and the afternoon is looking to identify the future strategies. Since the Unrest, there have been many new developments as you heard about in the last session. Part of this has been a significant increase in faith-based engagement along with many different forms of new social movement organizing.

I would like to introduce the speakers of this panel. [See Short Bios after transcription]
We’ll start with Carlos – tell us about how 1992 affect you and your organization.

Carlos: We were fresh off the Salvadoran Civil War. I would say that the majority of us were fighters, many of us lost friends and family during the war. When the riots started, I was eating
with some friends. We were all very surprised and shocked that this could be happening in LA. Just as we were getting adjusted to a new place, moving from war to peace and realizing the powerful country the US used to be. We were in the transition process from an early immigrant community to an established one, often involved in peace movements. The riots gave us the opportunity to come out as a new community and demand respect. A Councilmember accused Central Americans of the riots. A Mexican-American Councilmember in East L.A. said that not all Mexican Americans think that way and that many people had no alternative to do what they did in 1992. People just took advantage of the situation.

We have challenges including the fight for political representation. Salvadorans are the 4th largest Latino population [by nationality] in the nation. We need immigration reform – especially because so many of the dreamers are Salvadorans. We just witnessed the fight between Korean Americans and Latinos in [inaudible]. We need to have that kind of dialogue with the Asian community in the city and leaders in the city. Immigrants will integrate when given the opportunity, they have the ability to adjust and be a part of the system. I’m glad we are sitting here together.

BongHwan: I think it is funny in some ways, funny to be the manager [of Los Angeles City Department of Neighborhood Empowerment]. I was born in Korea and raised in an all white community in New Jersey, of all places. In terms of the biggest changes and structural reforms, Mayor Tom Bradley was there a little too long, Darryl Gates was unaccountable, and then Riordan came in on a stance of “being tough enough to turn LA around” and beat Mike Woo. Riordan wanted to be a strong mayor – unions were not a fan of that – and thus began the battle on how to restructure governments and part of that was establishing neighborhood councils.

While most people would run the other way, I ran to the problem. The autobiography of Malcolm X was very influential to me in high school. I wanted to create coalitions that would work across racial lines. I helped Korean Americans navigate coalitions. They would say, “you need to speak for us because we don’t know how to.” Racial dynamics were real in multi-cultural collaboratives as demographics changed. But, also, the demographics of participation weren’t (and aren’t) reflective of Los Angeles. It used to be whiter, older, better educated, with fewer children but change is happening and it’s a matter of time before more City Council people will be more beholden for sharing power.

Gloria: First, I just want to start by asking a few questions to this group. If you agree, please raise your hand. Wealth, power, poverty concentrations are at outrageous rates. Do you agree that people have a right to a good job, decent housing, education, good quality of life? [Majority raise hands.] Margaret Mead said, “A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” I ask these questions because this group is symbolic of Los Angeles. We agree on a common understanding of the problems and the solutions. That was something I learned when I started working at SCOPE.

I was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi – so, I was raised in the midst of clear racial dynamics. But I had privilege from testing well and the chance to travel internationally and nationally. People look differently at poverty but the root causes are the same. At UCLA, I had an internship at the Labor Center that changed my life. I am a homegrown community organizer and proudly identify as such. Low-income Black and Brown communities are our core at SCOPE. As our founder and president, Anthony Thigpenn, said, “We can’t do this work alone.” So training and capacity-building for many different organizations, movement-building organizations like SCOPE, became part of our work. We do research to inform our campaigns –
and that’s just one piece of many. Later, we integrated civic and voter engagement. But to build on that – because we didn’t want electoral politics to drive our work – was figuring out ongoing civic engagement, base-building, leadership development with real people in the community. As a result, we’ve been able to leverage power, resources, expertise. We identify as a vehicle because we are organized in the way we wage change. It’s all about having a base, one that can be mobilized and at the center of change.

Richard: A lot of new faith-based work got started in the wake of the ‘92 uprisings. The USC Center on Religion and Civic Culture has a report on this topic that can be downloaded from CRCC’s website. The question that drives this report is, “What happened after those efforts?” After all that action, the whole purpose of them was to “heal L.A.” Rev. Cecil “Chip” Murray was one of the main leaders trying to do this with the faith community. In a nutshell, the findings are pretty straightforward: Those that tended to last longer had better structure/infrastructure. Some lasted for a few years then dropped off because people of faith are busy and having structure is important. What does the faith community look like now?

In a report by CRCC, “Forging a New Moral and Political Agenda: The Civic Role of Religion in Los Angeles, 1992-2010,” we found several typologies of faith-based work. The first group revolves around charity and mercy. They are most of the action and are involved in food provision and services. This is not surprising. The second are those that do organizing. The third are involved in advocacy. The fourth are working in community development. F.A.M.E Renaissance was established in the wake of ‘92 and raised $400 million that created jobs and provided other services. The fifth type are groups doing interfaith dialogues. In the context of the group at this conference, while IAF was around and PICO was around, CLUE came up in ‘96 as there was a broader realization that the faith community was important. ‘96 was also welfare reform which affected many communities of faith and their work. And then the many faith-based initiatives under Bush and then Obama. State agencies want to rely on faith-based communities to get things across.

Michele: The unrest was one of the best opportunities to build toward a common agenda. Whatever your vantage point, what do you see as an opportunity for building a common agenda?

BongHwan: As general manager I’ll make a pitch for the neighborhood councils. Is anyone involved here? [Maybe one or two hands raised.] There’s a gauge. I think there’s opportunity in marrying organizing and neighborhood councils. There are neighborhood councils all over the place that are taking the City Council to the mat. In more affluent communities, people are old and politicians in these areas recognize that they are not going to get elected if they don’t do as they are asked. This isn’t the same in poorer communities. City departments do pay attention to councils.

Carlos: I assume majority of us here are progressive. We are here to organize around the next president. If we don’t re-elect President Obama, we are going to have a problem, especially around immigration reform and for the dreamers. Locally, we have to elect a mayor for the people not for special interests.

1 Available here: http://crcc.usc.edu/docs/CRCC%20Civic%20Role%20of%20Religion.pdf
Gloria: I agree what has already been said. I can start with the electoral work; there is opportunity where our communities understand power. It’s easy to measure increases, effectiveness in this area. There’s also the question of who else we can work with. There is opportunity where conditions and problems are getting worse to come together. I also want to highlight that labor is a force to be reckoned with. Los Angeles has always been known as a nexus of labor organizing - and the faith-based community is a key community we need to align with as we did in the past. Faith communities have historic value in civil rights and civic engagements and few institutions have a mass base like they do. What we want is to get to scale. There are 35,000 people that agree with us in Los Angeles about values. At SCOPE was talk about values as a mass-based group. We have to be intentional about targeting different sectors and being committed if we want to see impactful change. This is especially key because of regionalization and globalization. We need to build on multi-generational strategies.

Richard: Values! This just came out yesterday – “Putting Faith First: Traditions and Innovations in Organizing within Religious Communities” – stories of faith-rooted organizing. Organizers talked about how values influence how people do what they do and how they are using values to bring people together and mobilize them around social change. In Los Angeles County, there are 9,000 congregations. You do the math. They don’t all agree, but they have a certain source of root values. And in terms of being intergenerational, younger people don’t have the same categories about race and faith. I was at a meeting with an interfaith group and everyone was old. Where are the young people? Old people need to reach-out to young people and mentor them.

Audience Question: I’ve worked with some faith-based organizers in Los Angeles. Even when there is the will to organize, it seems like there are gaps between religious and secular groups. What challenges are we facing?

Richard: Sometimes that is a function of L.A. geography, but a lot of it is unclear. There is not a lot of talking between these networks.

Gloria: The effort just needs to be out there; it’s all about relationships. We have leaders that have been around for 30 plus years and they say it’s all about relationships. I’m trying to task that out for myself.

Audience Follow-up: I think we need to share the urgent need to unite.

Audience Question: How could the religious, labor and community-based organizing work together?

Audience Response: In the labor movement things are fast so we need close circuits. We can’t always go as an outside person. So, people from the congregations need to see these connections and influence their groups. Then, people need to take on the responsibility of connecting their congregation.

2 Available here: http://crcc.usc.edu/resources/publications/putting-faith-first.html
Carlos: Religious communities in the ‘80s joined us to provide shelter for refugees. They helped us to humanize the organizing efforts. While this didn’t touch the interests of the masses, the Sanctuary Movement put pressure on the Salvadoran government.

Michele: I’d like to recognize one of the city’s organizers, Larry Aubrey.

Audience Question (Larry Aubrey): Multi-racial ethnic coalitions include Afro groups but there was not one mention of blacks in the panels. This is not a question for you to deal with, it is for me to deal with – I am reflecting on how the black community itself wasn’t being represented. Simply saying, in our experience, it is really important to deal with the total landscape, and the sustainability of everybody. We all have to be honest at the table. With the Multicultural Collaborative, commitments at the table weren’t contiguous.

Michele: Thank you, Larry. So, in closing, what’s something that makes you hopeful?

Gloria: I can at least share one. That’s an important point that you are making [speaking to Larry], and one of things that we’ve talked about at SCOPE. ‘92 gave birth to lots of things, one of which is how we organize Black and Brown – work that Liberty Hill Foundation supports. So we’ve convened Black organizers from multi-racial organizations to figure out how we can develop a Black narrative that can be integrated into our organizations. Black unemployment is crazy and we really need to think about how we put it at the forefront.

Audience Comment: If a lot of the focus is on young people, I’m wondering what 9/11 did to faith-based organizing.

Richard: We need to let the Muslim community define themselves, as opposed to being defined by others. The American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute is a place where young Muslim leaders are being organized to be participants in the public sphere. Remember that faith is not just churches; there are a lot of other things happening, too.

Audience Comment: This is more of a comment on the youth in the group. I think there’s a difference in the ideology around how to bridge gaps. If you ask us, we don’t need to bridge because we’ve always done it, it’s all part of what we’re doing. We are all wanting be involved. I understand the connection between all these issues and hope there will be more open organizations to make for easier transitions. I’m more than happy to bridge organizations.

Michele: Good, yes. Connectivity, interrelationships are vital to this work. Thank you. To close this session, panelists, what makes you hopeful?

Carlos: We still believe in the possibilities; we believe in the power of organizing. The dreamers have proved it.

BongHwan: There is more power of change to be had. We need to change to remain relevant.

Gloria: A general understanding that none of us can do it without each other. There are opportunities in relationships.
Richard: The huge vast reservoir of untapped potential of people wanting to do something – from the faith-based community.

SHORT BIOS

Michele Prichard
Director, Common Agenda
Liberty Hill Foundation
Michele Prichard, Director of Common Agenda at the Liberty Hill Foundation in Los Angeles, began her involvement with the foundation as a volunteer in 1982. As Liberty Hill’s Executive Director from 1989 to 1997, she helped create new grant programs addressing poverty, racial justice and environmental health. Liberty Hill is now considered one of the most innovative public foundations in the country for its grantmaking, leadership training and alliance-building programs. Michele has served on the governing and advisory boards of many philanthropic efforts including the California Health and Environmental Funders Network, LA Urban Funders, the Southern California Association for Philanthropy, the Funding Exchange and the Working Group on Labor and Community. She also serves on the Board of Directors of the Venice Community Housing Corporation and the steering committee of GREEN LA. Mayor Villaraigosa appointed Michele to the Harbor Community Benefit Foundation in 2011, a nonprofit dedicated to improving the Port communities of Wilmington and San Pedro, California. Michele has served as a Senior Fellow in the UCLA School of Public Affairs since 2007, where she earned her M.A. in Urban Planning in 1989. Most recently, Michele was chosen as the recipient of the 2012 Distinguished Service Award from the Council on Foundations.

Carlos Vaquerano
Executive Director
Salvadoran American Leadership and Educational Fund (SALEF)
Carlos Antonio H. Vaqueráno is the founder and Executive Director of the Salvadoran American Leadership and Educational Fund (SALEF), since 1995. He has served on the boards and committees of many community and professional organizations, including the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), City of Los Angeles Latino-Hispanic Heritage Committee, Rebuild L.A. (RLA), Mayor Villaraigosa’s Education Advisory Council, and many more. For five years, Carlos was an active and highly visible member of the board of RLA, representing the Central American and Latino communities in many public policy issues. He advocated for the fair participation of Latinos and other ethnic groups in the rebuilding and healing process of the City of Los Angeles after the 1992 civil disturbances. As Executive Director of SALEF, Carlos works to promote the political participation and representation of Central Americans and Latinos in the political process through citizenship and voter registration efforts. He has been a strong advocate for educational opportunities and higher education for Central American and
Latino students in the United States through scholarships and school reform initiatives. Since his arrival to the United States in 1980, Carlos has been very involved and committed to social justice, legal, and human rights of the Central American and Latino communities in the United States.

**BongHwan Kim**

**General Manager, Department of Neighborhood Empowerment**

**City of Los Angeles**

Appointed by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa in 2007, Mr. Kim serves as the General Manager for the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. Approved by a majority of voters as part of the City’s Charter reform in 1998, its purpose is to improve government responsiveness to local concerns through a city-wide network of 95 Neighborhood Councils. The Los Angeles Neighborhood Council system is one of the most ambitious civic engagement initiatives in the country. He is responsible for the overall management of the department, advising policy makers, and building strategic partnerships with community-based stakeholders and public and private institutions. Prior to this, Mr. Kim has led a number of non-profit, community-based organizations involved in a range of social and community development missions including the MultiCultural Collaborative and the Korean Youth and Community Center. He has served on a number of federal and local government commissions as well as corporate and foundation advisory boards. He has served as the co-chair of the Black-Korean Alliance, the California Attorney General’s Violence Prevention Policy Council, the National Immigration Forum, and the U.S. Census Bureau. He is currently a Senior Fellow for the School of Public Affairs at the University of California, Los Angeles. Mr. Kim was a recipient of the NAACP Equality Award, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Drum Major Award, and the California Wellness Foundation’s Peace Award in recognition of his efforts to fight for the civil rights of all people. He holds a Master’s degree in public administration from Harvard University.

**Gloria Walton**

**Executive Director**

**Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE)**

Gloria Walton was appointed as Executive Director for SCOPE (Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education) in July 2010. SCOPE is a Los Angeles community organization with a mission to reduce barriers to social and economic opportunities for poor and working class communities. By creating public sector jobs and training programs, SCOPE has demonstrated how government, when responsive to communities, can work for everyone. SCOPE combines community organizing, public policy campaigns, civic engagement, strategic research, training and capacity building to contribute to shaping a broad movement for social and economic equity at the local, state and national levels. Gloria is a trained community organizer who has led the political education, leadership development and training of African Americans and Latinos in South Los Angeles. Since 2009, Gloria has led efforts to experiment with strategies to shift mass consciousness and build power by engaging, motivating, and inspiring voters in neighborhoods across the city to exercise their voice in public policies that affect their lives. SCOPE has identified over 34,000 voters in Los Angeles County who believe that government must invest in family-supporting jobs, quality education, and clean air and water. Following her graduation from UCLA in 2002, Gloria joined the
SCOPE team as an intern with AGENDA, the South Los Angeles organizing component of SCOPE. She transitioned to full-time staff in 2003 and was appointed Organizing Director in 2008. Gloria has a B.A. in Political Theory from University of California, Los Angeles. Gloria was named a "Leader to Watch" by the Liberty Hill Foundation in 2011. Gloria is a member of the Community Funding Board for Racial and Economic Justice for the Liberty Hill Foundation.

Richard Flory
Associate Professor, Sociology and Director of Research, Center for Religion and Civic Culture
University of Southern California

Richard Flory (Ph.D., University of Chicago) is Associate Research Professor of Sociology and director of research in the Center for Religion and Civic Culture and at the University of Southern California. He is the author/editor of Spirit & Power: The Growth and Global Impact of Pentecostalism (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), Growing up in America: The Power of Race in the Lives of Teens (Stanford University Press, 2010), Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation (Rutgers University Press, 2008) and GenX Religion (Routledge 2000). His current research is focused on several projects that investigate the role of religion and religious institutions in Los Angeles, including an investigation of the civic role of faith-based organizations in Los Angeles since the 1992 civil unrest; an ethnographic study of the Los Angeles Dream Center, a large-scale Pentecostal social outreach ministry; and a project investigating the current landscape of Pentecostalism in Los Angeles.