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Catholic Campaign for Human Development
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MOVING IN CONGREGATIONS ACTING IN HOPE

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Cortland and Broome Counties in central New York’s Southern Tier are largely rural swaths of rolling hills, punctuated by small cities still reeling from the massive exodus of manufacturing industries in the 1980s. When Rubbermaid, IBM, Smith Corona, Endicott-Johnson, and others moved their operations elsewhere, they left a wake of economic hardship and uncertainty. Poverty, crime, and unemployment grew at an unprecedented rate.

Two Catholic women who had completed the JustFaith program at their parish were determined to address the deteriorating situation by working for systemic change in Cortland County. With help from the PICO National Network (People Improving Communities through Organizing), they began to organize local churches to identify common issues and train others to implement solutions. They called themselves Moving in Congregations Acting in Hope (MICAH).

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) was MICAH’s first funder. Reverend Gary Smith, MICAH’s executive director since 2010, says, “CCHD got us off the ground and sustained us in the early years—and even today!” Smith was a founding board member of MICAH and is the pastor of East Side Congregational United Church of Christ in Binghamton.

Nine years into its existence, MICAH has twenty congregational members in both counties and a number of solid victories under its belt. Most have been won by polite and dogged persistence.

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is a huge and divisive issue in the area. The Southern Tier sits on top of the Marcellus Formation, a vast rock outcropping that contains natural gas trapped in layers of shale. The gas is released through a drilling process that injects water and chemicals into the ground under high pressure to fracture the shale and release the gas.

Proponents of fracking say it creates jobs, lowers the cost to consumers of natural gas, and contributes to the country’s energy security. Opponents say it wastes and contaminates water, leaks flammable methane into the air, and accelerates climate change.

It is legal in neighboring Pennsylvania counties but not in New York, where the discussion is heated and ongoing.

“We invited people to talk about fracking and got a roomful of concerned people,” Smith says. “People were worried.”

“For MICAH, it isn’t about being for or against, it’s about what Scripture



MICAH leaders gather with other New York residents in Albany on Policy Day to seek a state ban on hydrofracking and to support “Home Rule,” which allows local municipalities to regulate zoning laws, including those connected with gas drilling.

and God say about caring for creation and being stewards of the environment,” he says.

“If we look at the agricultural jewel we have in the dairy land of Cortland County, do we really have enough information to absolutely know that we are being good stewards if we allow fracking? So far, we don’t have enough information to tip the scale in that direction,” Smith says.

MICAH members worked for more than two years at the state and local levels to make sure their concerns were heard and reflected in legislation. They met with legislators, held rallies, and submitted hundreds of comments to the state during its consideration of fracking.

When the New York Court of Appeals ruled that local communities

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From the Director

Dear Friends,

“It takes years of hard work to become an overnight sensation.” Do you recall that old quip? It occurs to me that the same might be said for community organizing.

It’s a long, slow, tedious process. People of good will come together because they see an injustice that requires a response. Sometimes they can’t translate their enthusiasm into effective action, and they lose momentum. Or maybe they can’t raise money for systemic change in a community overwhelmed with more immediate needs. But, with persistence and hard work, they connect with experienced people who treat them with dignity and give them the knowledge and encouragement they need to make a difference. That’s where the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) comes in.

For more than 45 years, we’ve been helping small grassroots organizations turn good intentions into lasting change, one step at a time.

The featured group in this issue, Moving in Congregations Acting in Hope (MICAHA), works in an area of central New York that is the northern tip of Appalachia. It’s an agriculturally blessed but economically depressed region whose summer beauty has attracted vacationers for generations.

MICAHA’s founders were inspired by their transformative experience in the JustFaith program. They hit a few snags getting the organization off the ground, but they didn’t give up. Nine years after its start, MICAHA is confidently identifying and prioritizing issues in a changing landscape. Twenty member congregations in two counties are bound by a common belief that Scripture requires them to act.

MICAHA addressed the stewardship of creation through an intensive campaign to help local communities understand the contentious gas extraction program known as hydraulic fracturing. They encouraged municipalities to exercise their rights

to ban drilling under New York’s “home rule” provisions, at least until the risks and rewards are better understood.

At the same time, by helping member congregations recognize gang recruiting tactics, MICAHA is also addressing the insidious effects of drug use and gang growth in an area where poverty makes both appealing. Also, it is developing programs to disconnect young people from gangs or keep them from being ensnared.

CCHD local and national funding of MICAHA’s efforts reflects our mutual commitment to respect the life of all people. We act on our belief that all are made in the image of God. In community organizing, we give people the dignity of being able to stand up and be heard. We listen. We offer assistance. And we know that every CCHD grant serves justice by impacting the lives of individuals and their communities.

It doesn’t happen overnight, but when it happens, change is deep-seated and lasting.

Thank you for being a consistent part of our efforts.

Gratefully,

Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

VISIT OUR WEBSITE FOR MORE ON THE CATHOLIC FRAMEWORK FOR ECONOMIC LIFE:

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/economic-justice-economy/catholic-framework-for-economic-life.cfm>

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could enact their own bans, MICAH members respectfully presented testimony and scientific evidence at numerous town board meetings in Homer, a key agricultural community. The board ultimately enacted a moratorium on fracking.

New York governor Andrew Cuomo is expected to announce a statewide ban in 2015. “We feel we were a part of a cog in the wheel to make that happen at the state level,” Smith says.

“Every time I want to bang my head against the wall in frustration, I think about the awed look on Mary Lee Martens’s face the night we packed the senior center in Homer,” he says. Martens cofounded MICAH, and she longed to see local people rallying for a local issue and calling for change. Martens expected to see about 20 people come out to address the town board about fracking, but there were so many who wanted to speak, the meeting



MICAH leaders rally in front of the Homer Town Hall before holding a public action at the town board meeting for the purpose of winning a one-year moratorium on gas drilling. That moratorium was passed in October 2014.



MICAH leaders in Cincinnatus, NY, unveil their community sign at Cortland-Chenango Rural Services to promote the building of an indoor pool and recreation center that would serve rural children and families, many living in poverty.

was moved from the town hall to the senior center.

“Coming out of her Catholic faith and the JustFaith experience, she was seeing her dream come to fruition,” Smith says.

Despite the depressed economy, new people are flooding into MICAH’s membership area. Smith says public social service agencies in New York communities south of theirs are giving clients one-way bus tickets to relocate to Broome County to maintain their benefits.

“Even with good intentions, people sometimes encounter the same kind of issues they were trying to get away from,” Smith says. Gangs have been established, and “we’ve become a major center for drug traffic,” he says. “Cortland County leads upstate in meth-related drug crime.”

One of MICAH’s programs paired low-income children with student

mentors from the Newman Catholic Center at the State University of New York at Cortland. The children enjoyed companionship and guidance, and their families received Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares from a local farm. The mentors engaged the youngsters in conversations and demonstrations about how to incorporate the fresh food into their diets. They prepared a meal together and invited their families to share it.

Smith says congregational members are crucial to MICAH. The organization includes Catholic, Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and other Protestant churches. “Our connection is the sacred texts,” Smith says. “We interpret them differently, but we go out the door together, visioning the world that God dreams. The texts empower an entire group of people to take on systemic change,” he says.

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“The churches in the Southern Tier are very small. This type of membership lets us build relationships between congregations and do listening campaigns that get to the heart of the needs,” Smith says.

“We do intentional listening campaigns by going to food pantries and places where people access services, but we also listen by virtue of keeping our ears to the ground and picking up on what the clergy are talking about,” he says.

Most recently, the informal listening identified the puzzling lack of a homeless shelter in Cortland County. “People are getting shipped to Binghamton, Utica, and Syracuse. It looks like this will be an issue MICAHA will try to address,” Smith says.

“MICAHA is good at connecting people from different parts of the community to work on a particular issue or a common need,” he says. Even if some of the more economically stable members do not share the need, they

see the importance of the goal and work toward it.

“We’re also good at promoting systemic change among churches that are not oriented in that way and wouldn’t gravitate toward it if it wasn’t for MICAHA,” Smith says.

CCHD local and national grants are critically important to MICAHA. Smith says some other potential supporters “want to fund tangible brick-and-mortar projects. They don’t ‘get’ organizing and don’t see the importance of investing in systemic change.”

“We rely on CCHD funds to send people to training and to do issue campaigns. If not for CCHD, MICAHA would have folded in 2010. We would not exist today,” Smith says confidently.

Cindy Falise is a member of the local CCHD committee for the Diocese of Syracuse. Prior to her recent retirement, she served the diocese as director of both Respect Life and Catholic Charities. She has known MICAHA from its infancy.

MICAHA transformed from a good idea to an active, successful organization through hard work, Falise says. MICAHA formed a board, sought appropriate technical help, conducts annual meetings, promotes letter-writing campaigns, and lobbies in the state capitol, she describes.

“Respect for life is a key ingredient in MICAHA and the other groups CCHD funds in our diocese. They organize because something is wrong or unjust in the lives of people in the community: there may be environmental problems, or bad living conditions, or the lack of educational opportunities,” Falise says.

“This is about respecting life. It’s about giving people the dignity of being able to stand up and be heard.”



What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$300 million to more than 8,000 low-income-led,

community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD’s investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



An initiative of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development

Today, 46.2 million people in America are living below the poverty line.

That’s more than ever before—and far more than the population of our largest state. Join us and help to break the cycle of poverty.



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