

Faith in Action: Immigrants, Refugees, and Allies Pursue a Holistic Vision for Community-Initiated Education, Organizing, and Accompaniment

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Community Context

St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church was built in 1895 by Irish and Italian immigrants who called South Philadelphia home. They worked in manufacturing, on the docks along the Schuylkill River, and in small family-owned businesses including butcher's shops, hardware stores, and pastry shops, that were never more than a few steps from their front door. Many families enrolled their children in the local parish school, attended social activities hosted by the church, had kids who played sports in the Catholic Youth Organization leagues, and attended Mass during the week and on the weekends.

50 years later, the neighborhood became home to Black families migrating from the south to the northeastern

United States, often for employment opportunities. Fast-forward another 50 years and the community continues to be attractive to newly arrived immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Affordable housing, proximity to service industry jobs in the central business district, cultural and language-specific organizations, and strong public transit options make South Philadelphia attractive for new arrivals and a place where families can put down roots. These individuals and families, who hailed from across Southeast Asia and Latin America, were later joined by African refugees and immigrants from the West Indies.

Throughout all of this change, St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, the associated school that is governed by an independent regional board, and now the affiliated community outreach organization, Aquinas Center, have collectively maintained a positive orientation toward new arrivals by embracing an Old Testament imperative to "Welcome the immigrant and the stranger."

The parish is distinctive within the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in that it offers Mass in four languages each week -- English, Spanish, Bahasa Indonesia, and Vietnamese, and in the way that the lay leadership including the parish council, comes from across these constituent groups. A small, but active Filipino community identifies with the English-speaking Mass and the parish also maintains cultural and devotional practices that include programs in Tagalog.

While robust, the community is not wealthy, nor even considered middle class. Researcher Robert LeBlanc (2016) noted that, "According to the 2010 US Census, a majority of families in this neighborhood live below the poverty line, and clergy indicate the rate of poverty within the congregation is even higher." The St. Thomas Aquinas parish, which numbers 3,900 households with an average attendance of 1,200 people at Mass between Saturday and Sunday, is largely comprised of people who identify as Asian, Latin American, and Black, with a small percentage of White or Anglo-Europeans.

In 2015, the parish council re-worked its mission statement to include advocacy as a core focus. This reflects the parish and center's collaborative approach to organizing and outreach, which seeks to equip and empower people to seek social change that serves the needs of those on the margins and benefits the common good. This would include citizens, those who are undocumented, those holding green cards, legal permanent residents, asylum seekers, and newly resettled refugees. It also deploys a concept described by Pope Francis, which is to work toward a "Culture of Encounter."

In September 2013, the newly installed pontiff, formerly Cardinal Bergoglio of Argentina, addressed the growing conflict in Syria with a call for peace that was rooted in this culture of encounter. Pope Francis described this as the opposite of a "culture of conflict," or of a "throwaway culture" in which people are used and discarded, such as

low-wage workers, migrant workers, the homeless, the disabled, the unborn, those experiencing addiction, humans who are trafficked, and more. Pope Francis has continued this theme throughout his papacy with exhortations to engage in relationship building, dialogue, and reconciliation. The concept of encounter, of being in the same place at the same time, of beginning with hospitality and moving toward solidarity, is at the heart of a holistic vision for community-initiated education, organizing, and accompaniment.

History, Mission, and Values of Aquinas Center

Aquinas Center was launched in 2012 as a special project of St. Thomas Aquinas Church that was designed to respond to the needs and goals of the largely immigrant community. However, it quickly became apparent that there was significant demand and possibility for the entity to function as a separate, but affiliated social justice arm that could creatively engage both immigrants and allies.

After a series of one-on-one listening sessions, group discussions, research, and dialogue with potential partners, the parish's former convent was re-purposed in 2013 to house a center with a mission to build unity in diversity, support learning, and inspire thoughtful action. Hospitality, responsiveness, solidarity, and transformation were identified as values that would animate and advance this mission. Aquinas Center's founding board members

and stakeholders agreed that activities, which are motivated by Catholic faith and framed by Catholic Social Teaching, be inclusive of a range of affiliations and perspectives.

Most program participants who access literacy, legal supports, mental health counseling, youth development, or other immigrant-oriented programs come from within the densely-populated neighborhoods of the 19145, 19146, 19147, and 19148 zip codes that comprise South Philadelphia. Many walk, bike, or take public transit. These realities suggested that the center should focus on being a place-based site with additional energies spent on transforming the streetscape and campus where it is housed. This has been pursued through mural and mosaic projects as well as greening and gardening activities. An Indego Bikeshare station was installed in 2016 as part of an effort to increase affordable cycling options for underserved communities.

A Holistic Approach: Education, Organizing, Accompaniment, and Advocacy

Aquinas Center seeks to encounter the whole person across all dimensions: body, mind, and spirit. Programs and activities are then designed to engage individuals and communities across boundaries that often divide, such as language, culture, religion, socio-economic status, citizenship status, etc. This level of complexity, while at times frustrating to funders who want to support specific

program outcomes for individual populations, is at the heart of the center's holistic approach. It is also the framework for dynamic multi-cultural, multi-lingual learning experiences that create a strong foundation for other forms of collaboration for change, such as advocacy and organizing.

Because Aquinas Center is in relationship with a range of immigrant communities, it is frequently sought out by other organizations as an outreach site through which to communicate information to these groups. Outside requests for collaboration and partnership typically average three to four per month. These requests range from very specific to very broad. They have included opportunities to co-sponsor citizenship workshops for any interested individuals, host colon cancer screenings for Vietnamese seniors, offer fatherhood classes in Spanish, and storytelling circles for African refugees.

Serving as a link to social service providers and advocates is a role the center takes seriously, but one that comes with significant decision making considerations. Each request represents social and political capital that must be expended by Aquinas Center team members (whether that be paid, volunteer, or academic intern) to determine the relevance, fit, and benefit of the proposed opportunity. These are considered with lead gatekeepers from specific constituent groups within the context of the center's mission.

For example, does the request come from an organization that is trusted by the neighbors or by peer organizations? Has the organization, contact, or issue been divisive in the past? Does the group practice mutuality in how they approach the community they wish to support, empower, or engage with? Meaning, is the engagement truly bi-directional or is it handed out top down? Is fair compensation included in the use of space or stipends for participants? Will it lead to clear action that benefits the targeted group or will it simply serve to bolster the reputation of the one who proposed the partnership? Well meaning providers can desire to do good and assist vulnerable communities, but do so in a way that is extractive or further marginalizing. Organizations can also propose interventions that are not a good fit for the actual lived experiences of the community they wish to reach, such as choosing a day or time when that community is working or providing materials only in English. In addition, resources and team time are limited in a grassroots organization like Aquinas Center. Every good idea cannot result in a partnership project or program.

Education, and bi-directional learning, is the elemental work of Aquinas Center that drives related activities. For the local community, the center offers English language classes, literacy programs, leadership development, topical workshops, and participatory research activities. Immersion experiences that engage visitors from outside of Philadelphia offer hands-on experiences and learning

spaces that invite guests to grapple with social justice issues like poverty, hunger, homelessness, the environment, unmitigated redevelopment, poor working conditions, failing schools, and more. All of these activities are framed through the lens of migration and faith, which is the rooting concept for the center's founding and the shared reality of its neighbors.

The educational immersion experiences with high school and college students, parish groups, and university faculty invite visitors to be uncomfortable, to face difficult realities about injustice in society, and to explore ways they can take thoughtful action when they return to their own community. Adults and teens from the community help to set the agenda for these experiences. They use community atlases generated by teens in a summer leadership camp to lead immersive tours of various dimensions of the neighborhood. For example, one tour might focus on houses of worship and another looks at immigrant-owned food businesses. Teens are paid tour guide facilitators and help to foster dialogue before, during, and after the street level experiences. The funding from these programs helps to maintain the day-to-day operations of the center. The remainder of the center's operating budget comes from grants and private donations with significant in-kind collaboration from higher education partners such as the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education or West Chester University's Philadelphia campus.

Advocacy and organizing on issues related to migration flows naturally from critical inquiry. Once individuals, families, and allied groups understand the power dynamics, human rights considerations, and governing bodies that are involved, they are better able to act for the common good. Aquinas Center has cultivated and supported youth, young adult, and adult leaders to participate in lobbying efforts in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. on behalf of immigrant justice. The center has hosted city council members, police captains, and city agency staff for information sessions and programs relating to driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, street level violence, and gentrification concerns that impact the community's access to affordable housing and youth-inclusive public space. Community education/legal clinics to address immigration legal issues and targeted workshops on topics like obtaining or renewing an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) are regular offerings throughout the year.

Identifying and equipping youth leaders from across different cultural and language groups is a key part of Aquinas Center's holistic approach to education and organizing. These young people represent the future of Point Breeze and South Philadelphia. They are also often more clear about the potential for multi-lingual, multi-cultural, allied collaboration to yield strong organizing wins. Teens may first come to Aquinas Center seeking to fulfill a community service requirement for their school or

to find a welcoming place to be themselves. The Youth Voices program, which meets on Tuesday afternoons, then plugs them into civic engagement activities that are both skill and relationship building. Teens have participated in asset mapping, power mapping, listening sessions, mural painting, community gardening, lot clean-up, career panels, and more. From this base, other programs have developed and attracted funding, such as the Youth Entrepreneurship Project, Kasama farmstand and pop-up cafe, mural corps, youth researchers, and Aquinas Ambassadors. Each one has an advocacy or social change component, which prepares the teens to participate in larger conversations within Philadelphia and beyond the city limits.

One way the center conceives of these intersecting activities and constituent groups is through the language of "advocacy discourse communities" with the "congregation" or community at the center. In the image below, which was first designed for a book entitled *Partnering with Immigrant Communities: Action for Literacy* (2016), one can also come to understand the framing of what the authors refer to as the "human rights metanarrative," that "offers a language through which community members name inequities and appeal to a social justice vision that links their disparate and overlapping struggles" (p. 33).

Activism as it is named above, also known as community organizing, is an effort that, for the first four years of the

center's existence, was pursued largely in collaboration with other organizations. For example, for two years, Aquinas Center was a site for meetings related to the PA Fight for Driver's Licenses. The center provided the space, advertised the gatherings, and supported the work financially as donations and grant funding allowed. Community members who are involved in several center programs (English classes, parenting workshops, yoga classes, and more) were the core of the organizing effort.

In 2015, the St. Thomas Aquinas parish council voted to join the New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia, which since the founding of the center had been a collaborating partner for Know Your Rights trainings. The Aquinas Center again hosted meetings and associated activities, used social media to garner participation, funded the membership fee, and cultivated leaders from the local community. In this way, the parish and center work collaboratively to leverage resources and expertise to respond to constituents' greatest hopes and most pressing needs.

Aquinas Center's capacity to organize community members on its own has evolved as funding, the political climate, and need changed. One specific example of this work is the newly launched Community ID program.

Case example: Community ID Program

According to a report issued by the Brennan Center for

Justice at the NYU School of Law (2006), 11 percent of U.S. citizens do not have a government-issued identification and those who are poor, elderly, and minorities are the most likely to experience challenges in obtaining and maintaining access to a suitable identification card. This is especially true for undocumented immigrants, yet these IDs are critical to accessing public institutions, hospitals, schools, and other locations. In these situations, it can become very difficult for parents to pick up their children from a public school classroom, to show proof of age to make some purchases, or to even visit a loved one in the hospital when they are critically ill.

Some municipal governments have assisted residents with the creation of a municipal ID that includes basic information, such as a photo, legal name, address, date of birth, physical descriptors, and the signature of the person named on the card. There is no claim that this kind of card offers citizenship, but it is a dignified way to assist marginalized communities with some of the foundational considerations of life in the United States. Cities that have initiated Community or Municipal IDs include: New Haven, Connecticut; El Paso, Texas; Oakland, California; and Newark, New Jersey. A white paper from CLINIC (2016) suggests that, if municipal IDs are not feasible, non-profits might pursue their own form of alternative identification.

The impetus for a Community ID program through Aquinas Center came from the local Indonesian diaspora,

which is estimated to include ten thousand people in South Philadelphia. The administrative effort through Aquinas Center was led by an AmeriCorps*VISTA member (who later transitioned to a paid employee in the role of Director of Outreach at Aquinas Center) and an advocacy intern from West Chester University's Philadelphia campus. Together they researched models from across the country, contacted advocacy groups who had successfully launched programs, and prepared materials for discussion with the larger parish community and non-affiliated residents. Several weeks of dialogue and meetings unfolded as the parameters of the ID were considered. Opportunities and challenges were explored collectively.

Ultimately, the Community ID working group presented the final concept to the parish council (a body of 22 people) who gave their consent for the ID program to move forward under the auspices of the church's logo and name. The data was handled extremely carefully and a small fee of ten dollars was charged per ID to cover the cost of purchasing the ID machine, software, and supplies. Approximately 125 people registered in the first round through the leadership of the Indonesian community. The entire process took about five months from start to finish.

The next step, after the IDs are in circulation, is to conduct trainings with local police, library staff, school staff, and other local groups that might encounter the IDs. There is

also a Latinx leadership team convening to expand the program to Spanish-speaking community members. This staggered pacing reflects the need for sensitive information -- against the backdrop of a rapid rise of exclusionary rhetoric -- to be handled with trust by respected leaders. This leadership comes from long-time residents and the center team provides administrative, educational, and technological support.

Challenges and Improvement Opportunities

A significant challenge of deploying a holistic approach to community-initiated education, organizing, and accompaniment is the need to stay close to the mission and values of the organization. There is a constant checking and re-checking to ensure that, in a desire to address the whole person, the work has not strayed too far or demanded too much from an already stretched team. Aquinas Center grew quickly by engaging an energized local community rich in leadership gifts and by leveraging institutional partnerships.

However, maintaining leadership structures in situations of precarity is challenging. A community member with leadership potential might work six days a week and not have much of any leisure time to participate in trainings that could strengthen his or her skill set. Others might be facing threats of deportation, which restrict their movements in the neighborhood. Funding, which is hard to come by for community organizing work that is in its

nature about relationships and power dynamics, can limit the staff time allocated to nurturing emerging ideas. Moreover, the rapidly changing demographics introduce concerns about who will be able to afford to live in walking distance of Aquinas Center, which has defined itself as a neighborhood entity with a distinctive geographic, place-based orientation. Ways to mediate aspects of neighborhood change continue to be considered by the board of directors and community residents.

Looking ahead, Aquinas Center desires to maintain the place-based nature of the current work while serving as a resource to organizations and institutions beyond the neighborhood. For example, the center might deepen its commitment to publishing community-based action research findings in accessible forms, speaking about the tangible realities of the adaptive re-use of church property, and welcoming visitors seeking models for intercultural collaboration. Coalition relationships across Philadelphia and the state of Pennsylvania are another way to broaden the impact of Aquinas Center's mission to build unity in diversity, support learning, and inspire thoughtful action.

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Author Bios

Andrea Rusli is originally from Indonesia and moved to the United States in 2012. She is a rising senior at Neumann-Goretti Catholic High School. Ms. Rusli has served as the secretary of the Aquinas Center's Youth Voices program and participates in the Youth Entrepreneurship Project. She is passionate about issues of social justice and intersectionality and wants to attend a liberal arts college with a major in religious, ethnic, and women's studies.

Atianah Thomas is a rising senior at Neumann-Goretti Catholic High School. She is an active member of the

Aquinas Center's Youth Voices program and the Youth Entrepreneurship Project. Ms. Thomas has worked for nearly one year as a research assistant on participatory action research projects with Aquinas Center, including helping to write two book chapters and a conference presentation at the Penn Ethnography Forum. She is particularly interested in issues of neighborhood change and equal pay for women. Ms. Thomas aspires to be a doctor of osteopathic medicine.

Bethany J. Welch, Ph.D. is the founding director of the Aquinas Center and a practitioner/scholar whose research looks at faith-based community development, intercultural collaboration, university-community partnerships, and national service. Originally from Rochester, NY, Dr. Welch came to Philadelphia to serve as an AmeriCorps*VISTA to help open the Community Center at Visitation in 2003 and fell in love with the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection. She is the co-author of a book called *Partnering with Immigrant Communities: Action through Literacy* and has published in the Harvard Educational Review.