

## OMAHA TOGETHER, AS ONE COMMUNITY

BY BETH GRIFFIN

“Instead of everyone moaning and groaning about our problems and feeling helpless, we develop leaders, gather a sense of strength, seek answers in a way that people don’t feel bruised, and work together to make changes.” In a nutshell, Fr. Frank Baumert captures the essence of successful community organizing and describes the methodical process used by Omaha Together One Community (OTOC).

The neighborhood around Holy Name, Fr. Baumert’s parish in inner-city Omaha, Nebraska, struggles with violence and poverty. Nevertheless, OTOC has helped to energize concerned people, to replace hand-wringing with effective action that happens to embody Catholic social teaching.

OTOC is a multi-ethnic, ecumenical organization of some twenty-five churches, schools and parent groups, and 300 individuals committed to promoting a safe, healthy environment for children and their families. With help from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, OTOC evolved from a temporary committee to a sustainable organization fifteen years ago. Catholic groups compose more than half of the OTOC membership, reflecting the population of Omaha.

Omaha is a historically segregated midwestern town, home to successful insurance, banking, and meat-packing businesses. Its residents reflect the ethnic diversity of the United States and the economic reality of the 21st century. OTOC was and is the only forum in Omaha where people come together across racial, economic, and confessional lines to discuss the issues that both unite and divide them—and then work together for solutions.

OTOC began as a group of religious leaders who gathered to discuss how the needs of their parishioners



Photos courtesy of OTOC

OTOC members addressing education concerns.

were not being met by the systems in place in their community. Rosie Volkmer, an early OTOC leader, says the group was inspired by *Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation, and World*, the 1991 pastoral statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“What the bishops said at that time was so heartening,” says Volkmer. “They spoke of things that would make life better for families and children,” which is an ongoing focus for OTOC efforts.

OTOC has many interests and has worked to improve youth programs, relationships between the community and the police, worker safety, and parental involvement in schools. It has led efforts to reduce violence, replace sewers, weatherize homes, and encourage neighborhood revitalization. It has promoted just wages and working conditions for employees of the meat-processing industry.

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR

### *Brothers and Sisters,*

The Holy Season of Lent calls us all to deeper prayer, generous almsgiving, and sacrificial fasting. When all of us partner with the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, this partnership invites us to a solidarity of prayer that allows our prayers to join with the prayers of those in poverty. Their prayers may be for employment, education, insurance, or safety. CCHD helps us to include in our daily prayer those whom we haven't met but with whom we share much.



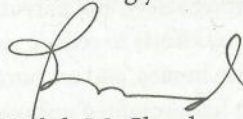
CCHD also gives us an opportunity to be in solidarity by sharing our resources with those who strive to improve their lives. During Lent, many of us swear off candy, meat, snacks, extra meals, or other pleasures. Our fasting often acknowledges our excess and our surplus. CCHD helps all of us be in solidarity with those who must fast because of lack. For millions of Americans, everyday life is a struggle.

CCHD promotes and practices solidarity by supporting organizations and activities that bring poor people together to make a positive difference in their own communities. CCHD also advances solidarity by encouraging and supporting bridges of understanding and common action to overcome poverty and advance the common good.

In the words of Pope John Paul II, solidarity is "*a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all*" (*On Social Concern* [*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*] [1988], no. 38).

Your generosity helps efforts like those of Omaha Together One Community to come together, look at community needs, and respond in a way that benefits the common good. CCHD understands community and understands the essence of allowing people to name needs and develop solutions that they can work on together.

Wishing you a holy Lenten season,



Ralph McCloud  
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

### 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 \$280 million to more than 7,800 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.

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Typically, OTOC raises issues in meetings held in households throughout the city. OTOC organizer Mark Darby says, “We listen to what people say. We do heavy research on why the conditions exist, and we ask clear questions.”

A network of community leaders trained with funding from CCHD helps mobilize OTOC members to meet with local officials to present workable long-term solutions.

Fr. Norman Hunke, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo in suburban Gretna, Nebraska, and a long-time OTOC leader, says the organization’s thoughtful approach has given it “traction in the community.” He says it provides a structure for religious groups and organizations to develop working relationships and address actual local issues.

The agenda of OTOC embodies Catholic social teaching, says Fr. Hunke. “We have a rich tradition that helps us approach these issues. I’m not sure the other denominations are that steeped in it,” he says. “It comes down to the Church’s stand that a worker has rights and dignity. Social justice is not an option, but a requirement for anyone who considers himself or herself a Catholic.”

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—FR. NORMAN HUNKE  
LONG-TIME OTOC LEADER

Fr. Hunke describes speaking at his former parish, St. Cecilia’s Cathedral, about conditions in meat-packing plants in Omaha. “I had heard of abuses and gross indecencies, such as fast [processing] lines, crumpled arms, repetitive motion injuries, and lack of bathroom privileges, where workers urinated on themselves rather than leave the line. I think a lot of people thought those days were past.”

Concentrating on worker safety, food security, and just wages, OTOC supported the right of the meat-packing employees to vote on whether to unionize. Volkmer says OTOC brought together people from all over Omaha to push for a new sewer system in the oldest part



Creighton students rally with OTOC for immigrant driver’s certificates.

of the city. Population growth and the passage of time wreaked havoc on an old system that combined sanitary and storm sewers. When the city considered a bond issue to fund sewer improvements, it did not include any projects in the older, poorer areas of Omaha.

From OTOC house meetings on other issues, Volkmer says, “I knew the people who had raw sewage backing up in their basements. OTOC mounted a postcard campaign asking why the sewer bond excluded that part of the community. Postcards were received from people who were directly impacted and [from] people from the other side of the city.”

The campaign was a success, and Volkmer attributes it to people getting to know one another through OTOC. “We had an impact on a serious problem,” she says. “I’m impressed by the difference it makes when people of faith work together to seek solutions to things that are of great importance to our community.”

CCHD funding is crucial to the success of OTOC. Grants support the salaries of key staff members and ensure that training programs identify and develop new leaders. Volkmer says help from CCHD is also a reminder that “Our Catholic Church and our bishops encourage us.”

The issues OTOC tackles are driven by the member congregations, says Joseph Higgs, OTOC’s lead organizer. “Ultimately, this is about teaching people to take action on their own behalf.”

Fr. Hunke says, “OTOC is a voice for people without one. It surfaces issues that are real to the community. It does its homework and decides whether or not to take a stand.”

Looking ahead, Higgs says the organization is challenged to maintain its diversity and animate and give

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new meaning to its name, Omaha Together *One* Community. "We're the only organization here that pushes ordinary people to talk to each other, to challenge each other and discuss hard issues," he says.

Its effect on members is deep and abiding. "We're so committed to this way of living our faith we can't

## SUN DAWGS

When working parents in Omaha needed a safe place for their children to spend summer days, OTOC helped create the political will in 1995 to develop and fund Sun Dawgs, a recreation and enrichment program at sites across the city. Dwindling public funding curtailed the program's hours and threatened to doom it altogether. But in the past two years, since a disturbed young man opened fire at a department store, killing eight people and seriously wounding others, Sun Dawgs has become a critical element in reducing violence, supporting youth, and encouraging neighborhood revitalization.

OTOC took the lead in revitalizing Sun Dawgs. Parents in low-income neighborhoods told OTOC volunteers in door-to-door conversations that they would feel less stressed about working two jobs if they knew their children had a supervised place to escape the summer streets.

Urging the city council to fund Sun Dawgs, OTOC member Reverend Michael Williams of Risen Sun Baptist Church asked, "What would we rather see in the hands of Omaha youth: basketballs or guns?" The council approved funding for a full-day summer session for children ages 6-15.

The largest Sun Dawgs program is based at Holy Name Church. OTOC and the parish augment the public grant with lunch, sports equipment and a mentoring program for the 60 to 80 youths who appear each day.

Fr. Frank Baumert says OTOC "has given us a new chance to revitalize the neighborhood. Fifty years ago, Holy Name was *the* parish in *the* neighborhood in Omaha. Now we have people who can no longer take care of their basic needs. OTOC helps families and individuals regain strength to take their place in society in a positive way."



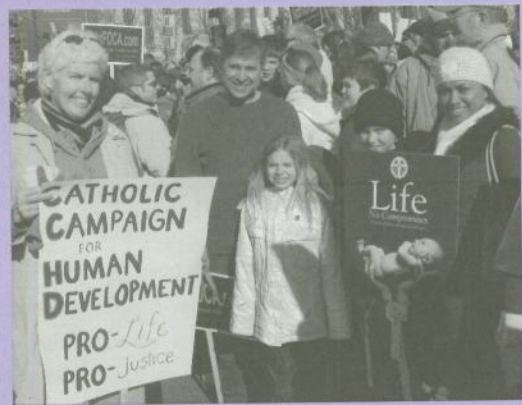
Sun Dawgs teachers.

imagine not having an organization like OTOC," says Volkmer of the group's members. "There is just such a sense that this is what our faith calls us to do. OTOC is a vehicle to live out our faith and make a difference." ☉

He says OTOC helps drive neighborhood revitalization and keep children safe by working with owners of empty buildings to prevent them from being used for inappropriate activities. "We try to find the right solution before kids get hurt. It takes a bunch of concerned people to make a big difference," Fr. Baumert says. "Then people will see it as a neighborhood worth working on." ☉

## MARCHING FOR LIFE

Respect for the life and dignity of every person is the foundation of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. A principle goal of CCHD is promoting respect for the lives and dignity of the poor and vulnerable, those without power or status. This essential principle is why CCHD will not fund organizations that engage in activities that conflict with Catholic teaching on human life and dignity, that promote abortion or euthanasia, that undermine the family, or that tolerate racism or unjust discrimination. CCHD seeks to help change the social structures and policies that undermine or diminish human life and dignity, especially for the poor and powerless.



Diocese of Arlington CCHD staff and volunteers, along with some family members, participated in the national March for Life in Washington, DC, this January. CCHD remains committed to building community, overcoming poverty, and defending human dignity. Photo by Terry Angelotti. Pictured are Anne Murphy, CCHD diocesan committee (Blessed Sacrament Parish, Alexandria); Steve Luteran, CCHD diocesan director, along with his children, Maria and Stephen; and Christiane Razafijemisa, CCHD diocesan committee (St. Thomas More Parish, Arlington).