

Cross-Sector Alliances

Cross-cultural and interfaith alliances are key components of the PICO experience. However, as microcosms of society, cross-sector tensions have seeped into their member congregations, stirring debate and creating moments of frustration. To better prepare for and prevent these incidents, PICO has intentionally begun to build bridges between disparate groups. PICO members say they have already experienced some success.

On the Martin Luther King holiday weekend, seven PICO affiliates joining forces in five California counties for a citizenship and civic participation drive held a kickoff event. An estimated 600 people attended, with Latinos and African-Americans standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Adam Kruggel, executive director of the Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), says that his immigrant constituents see their struggle as part of "the freedom struggle in America."

In Richmond, which has experienced an explosion of Latino immigrants, Kruggel says there are signs that tensions between African Americans and Latinos are improving. In some cases, African Americans are taking Spanish classes while Latinos study English. And throughout the PICO network, immigrant congregations work in unison with African-American churches and synagogues. In Los Angeles, Jared Rivera, executive director of LA Voice, notes that members from a variety of congregations are volunteering as ESL tutors to assist newcomers improve their English skills in preparation for their naturalization exams.

Some PICO networks have been overly identified as strictly Latino organizations, a characterization that the affiliates are countering. Alberto Velazquez, director of the PICO affiliate North Valley Sponsoring Committee, says that although their citizenship drive began with the naturalization of 60 Latinos, his outreach soon became more inclusive. "If we don't open the doors to all immigrants, we only hurt ourselves," Velázquez says. His outreach broadened to include the Ukrainian, Filipino and Hmong communities. His efforts to reach the Sikh community, Velázquez says, have failed; he vows to try again once he hires a Sikh organizer.

Diana Reddy, a retiree and co-chair of Peninsula Interfaith Action's (PIA) board of directors, admits to observing tempers flare at meetings. "We've had immigrant leaders who stopped being involved because they felt that our work was not relevant to them," she explains. PIA was also challenged to explain to native-born members why immigration was deserving of their support. "Immigration is a complex issue and it takes a bit of finesse to find an area so that everyone can support what you're doing. We found that regardless of members' position on illegal aliens, nonimmigrants felt they could support those individuals interested in citizenship."

PIA has implemented a multi-cultural program to teach members how to communicate with each other and build authentic relationships. Reddy says the training has helped her. "My tendency personally as a well-intentioned white person has been paternalistic. I am starting to see that now. I used to think that I knew what was needed without asking questions." She is optimistic about the citizenship drive and

believes that with the help of new citizens, her congregation will be able to turn its attention – with a unified voice – to other issues, including advocacy for the withdrawal of local support for ICE raids.

The Rev. Drew Nettinga, pastor of San Lorenzo Community Unified Church of Christ , a member of PICO affiliate Communities Organizing for Renewal (COR) in the Bay Area, says that his small, primarily Anglo congregation is "very excited" about the prospect of helping immigrants to become active citizens.

"There has been a process of education [in my congregation] and we have been looking at how the Bible speaks to the issue of immigrants and that has helped people. We have been dealing with issues of justice and fairness as a way to live out the Gospel. As the pastor of the church, this is something I push as often as I can."