

Women's Division Statement on ACORN October 2009

Since United Methodist Women members received the January 2009 issue of *Response* carrying a photograph of an ACORN poster on the cover, we have received a number of inquiries regarding our relationship with ACORN as well as expressions of concern due to issues which have been reported about this organization over the last 10-12 months. ACORN is the *Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now*, which includes several corporate entities organized for different types of work and a membership base of individuals and organizations.

What support has UMW offered to ACORN?

Last financial support: In 2000, a one-time grant of \$2,000 was made to ACORN for its work on Welfare/Workfare issue called ACORN Living Wage Project. No grants have been made since then.

What relationship does UMW have with ACORN?

While we have similar goals of economic justice for low-income workers, and registration of voters in marginalized communities, in the last two quadrennia, we have not worked with ACORN or ACORN-Housing. Here is a list of recent references in our materials:

Last Coverage at WD Board Meeting:

In the October 2008 meeting of the Women's Division, the Christian Social Action section referenced ACORN Housing as one of two contacts for helping UMW protect against home foreclosures. Both are national organizations providing access to counseling for homeowners.

Last Action Alert:

A November 2008 Action Alert, assisting UMW to respond to the economic crisis, called "A Breach in the Wall: Watching for Justice," included a reference to ACORN-Housing as a contact for "free housing counseling to low and moderate income homebuyers."

Last feature in *Response*:

The January 2009 issue contained an article on the poor and the economic crisis which also included reference to ACORN-Housing as a contact for counseling for homeowners. The cover of the issue had a picture of an ACORN poster taken at an event. UMW had no particular association or connection to the event at which we took the picture.

Who is ACORN?

The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now is the country's largest grassroots membership organization of low and moderate-income people. It began in 1970 as a small group of welfare mothers in Little Rock, Arkansas and now has a membership of some 500,000. ACORN has organized several independent entities to carry out its work, including ACORN-Housing. Since its founding, ACORN has fought successfully to increase the minimum wage, increase the quality of public education in poor communities, rebuild thousands of homes and assist people in relocating after Hurricane Katrina, register millions of poor people to vote, and protect people from predatory lending practices.

This year, ACORN is active in a community-labor campaign to win healthcare reform; it is engaged in the fight against foreclosures; members are advocating for financial reform including regulations on the financial industry; they are advocating for labor law reform and are active in promoting comprehensive immigration reform. They plan to be active in voter turn-out for the mid-term elections in 2010.

What concerns are being expressed?

Several state attorneys general are investigating claims of fraudulent voter registration conducted by ACORN affiliates.

In September, 2009, James O'Keefe and Hannah Giles, pretending to be a pimp and a prostitute, captured ACORN and ACORN Housing employees in Baltimore on videotape, offering advice on tax and mortgage assistance for a prostitution business. ACORN leaders condemned the behavior of these staffers, who were fired. The team tried the same action in other ACORN offices, where they were rebuffed. Philadelphia staff filed a police report. ACORN has raised concerns about entrapment, journalistic ethics, trespass and videotaping without consent.

It has also recently come to light that ACORN settled a matter involving embezzlement by its former director of about one million dollars with a private restitution agreement without disclosure of the matter to the Board of Directors.

Throughout this time there has been intense media coverage of ACORN, followed by House and Senate votes to block federal funding for ACORN and the US Census Bureau severing ties with the organization.

What response has ACORN made?

Staff involved in each incident either had already left the organization and/or affiliate or were fired or placed on leave during an investigation. ACORN reported the voter registration issues voluntarily and is cooperating with authorities in their on-going investigations.

On September 22, 2009, ACORN announced that former Massachusetts Attorney General Scott Harshbarger was appointed to lead an independent inquiry into the "organizational systems and processes" of the group's social services and will make public the results of that inquiry.

What responses can/should Women's Division make?

We reaffirm our commitment to voter registration for people in all communities.

We affirm our commitment to housing reform and our support of the Community Reinvestment Act as a tool to help make loans available in communities with unequal access to financial institutions.

While we continue to commend the organization's stated purposes, we could not commend ACORN's conduct of its work in as general a way today as we did when either the November Action Alert or the January 2009 *Response* went to press. Most of the information that is now known about internal issues at ACORN was not publicly available at that time; none of this information was available in 2000 when the one-time grant was made. Since there is no current financial or organizational relationship between Women's Division and ACORN, and since ACORN has taken action to terminate or place on leave employees who behaved improperly and to assess its systems to safeguard against future improper behavior, we will await the outcome of its internal reform.

Larger Concerns

This briefing statement begins by clarifying relevant facts. If it has succeeded in doing so, perhaps it is now possible to turn to another aspect of this matter. The press and the talk shows have been vehement in their condemnation of the entire organization. The advocates reporting the fraudulent loan applications resorted to the tactic of misrepresenting themselves for the benefit of a concealed video camera—surely this is the action of an extremist?

We agree that ACORN should take responsibility and be held accountable for any improprieties, which are currently under investigation. At the same time, we believe that attacks on ACORN are part of a larger effort to weaken and marginalize the voices of thousands of poor and working communities, particularly communities of color, who are forcefully organizing for a greater share of the resources of this nation. While some viewers have expressed genuine concern about the news reports regarding ACORN, the blitz of media attacks have been fed by specific media outlets and political parties to undermine the organization. These groups hope to shift the public debate and gain leverage against many reform bills working their way through Congress – from health care reform, to financial reform, to immigration and labor law reform. This is an effort to discredit not only ACORN, but community organizers and public officials who actively advocate for these reforms.

It is remarkable that the 10 year old fraud, the self-reported registration irregularities that did not result in improper voting and the videotaping and attempted videotaping of several front line employees has generated such a response. Much more significant fraud was committed at financial institutions bundling these very loans, or by defense contractors overcharging for incomplete or inadequate work, without the sort of media focus that ACORN has received. Why is there not similar outrage over these issues?

Anger is an emotion, not a barometer of either the accuracy of the speaker or the importance of the issue. The disproportionate anger that has been unleashed on this organization leads us to the conclusion that the outrage stems from the same combination of political viewpoint, race and class that is polarizing our nation as a whole. The violations committed by staff of ACORN and its affiliates have become clear, as has the organization's response. The motives of the pundits remain somewhat more clouded.

Media Monitoring:

United Methodist Women have done "media monitoring" in the past. Today we encourage UMW members to ask critical questions as they watch the news and to dig deep, in this and other situations, to explore what's going on behind the headlines. In each case, it is important for us to ask:

- Who is behind the story and the claims?
- What are their interests?
- Who benefits from this story?
- Who stands to lose?
- How will this undermine or enhance the justice agenda shaped by the Gospel and embraced by the United Methodist Church in our Book of Resolutions, and by United Methodist Women?
- What will be the impact on poor people and communities of color?
- How can we take a stand on the side of equality, racial justice and access for all, in commitment to fulfilling the Charter for Racial Justice?

Biblical Basis: Isaiah 1:17. "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow..."

Policy Basis: Social Principles, The Economic Community, #163, 2008 Book of Resolutions, pp. 537-538. "In order to provide basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, and other necessities, ways must be found to share more equitably the resources of the world...As a church, we are called to support the poor and challenge the rich. To begin to alleviate poverty, we support such policies as: adequate income maintenance, quality education, decent housing, job training, meaningful employment opportunities, adequate medical and hospital care..."