

Churches, labor team to clean up community

By Jim Wood
Examiner staff writer

They're tough idealists who can deal with problems as down-to-earth as garbage cans and dope dealers.

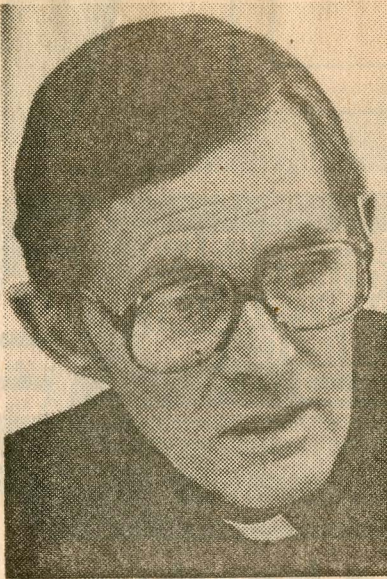
Eighteen San Francisco churches and synagogues, allied with a dozen labor unions, have quietly formed and trained a citywide, grass-roots organization to respond to Proposition 13, job cuts and Reaganomics.

If the project lives up to its well-organized beginnings, it promises to be one of the most powerful forces in The City, uniting neighborhood churches and synagogues with big labor in a community action organization.

With funding from 16 foundations and backing from both the San Francisco Labor Council executive committee and Archbishop John Quinn, this organization amounts to a national first of its kind, with the muscle to remain independent. Its bylaws prohibit backing individual political candidates. Instead, it is dedicated to Judeo-Christian values and democratic ideals.

It's called the San Francisco Organizing Project.

But if the organization has the sup-



Examiner/Sid Tate

FATHER PETER SAMMON, UNION LEADER WALTER JOHNSON 'The churches and the unions have a joint constituency'

port of some of Northern California's most well-heeled liberal groups, its strength comes from individual members in the neighborhoods.

The organization is already making itself felt.

Father Peter Sammon of St. Teresa's Catholic Church in the Potrero District recalls that four weeks ago 16 people went to see the manager of the Safeway at 16th and Potrero. A parishioner who was a shopper at the store had been attacked, incurring injuries that required 114 stitches and five pints of blood. The group wanted Safeway to provide security in the store by training personnel to handle such situations. The protesters also wanted

guards in the parking lot.

Safeway is beginning to respond, Sammon says. The store is handling security inside the building as it always has; none of several serious neighborhood attacks occurred there. But while Safeway cannot assume legal responsibility for the parking lot, Sammon says it has indicated a willingness to pay a fair share of protection costs there. Now the organization is attempting to win over the owner of the parking lot.

In a survey in the neighborhood members of the organization at St. Teresa's had found that, besides crime

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another major concern was clean streets. They successfully alerted the SPCA about uncurbed dogs and have gone to The City about a sort of ad hoc junkyard housing 45 cars in an unused lot.

Another neighborhood concern was housing. Lawanna Potts of the Potrero Hill Tenants Association says that individual garbage cans were removed by the Housing Authority and replaced by dumpsters, one bin to 40 households. The result was an eyesore with a large increase in rats. In addition, she says, the bins were emptied only twice a week, causing a health hazard and dangerous traffic as people from outside came into the area to dump garbage. Senior citizens and disabled people found the bins hard to use. Worst of all, she says, was the danger that youngsters playing in the area could fall into the bins and be trapped.

The tenants have taken their complaints to the Housing Authority, although so far the most they can claim is that Director Carl Williams has agreed to talk with them.

Williams says he is open to suggestions from the organization. He says that the dumpsters were installed as a cost saver, that they are in use in non-public housing and that there is an argument that they are more healthy because they cannot be tipped over. He also challenges the organization's contention that the bins bring in rats and impede traffic but says he expects to talk the matter over in detail with the protesters.

Sammon says he is pleased with the progress his neighborhood is making toward organization.

"A year ago we wouldn't have had the people or the expertise to do it," he says.

Velma Baggett of True Hope Church of God in Christ on Gilman Avenue says her group took a different problem to the Housing Authority. A lot owned by the Housing Authority was filled with iron junk, she says, and people in her neighborhood wanted the eyesore removed. She says she asked for a meeting with Al Stagnaro, head of maintenance for the Housing Authority, and was promised he would call back. She did not hear from him and two weeks later called again. Then she set up a meeting where more than 30 residents waited in vain for the housing official to arrive.

"We let him know we were very disappointed," she says.

Finally the maintenance chief and top aide John Evans came out and looked at the lot, which Baggett explained was extremely dangerous to children in the area. She says Evans promised to take care of the situation within 10 days but did not. On Oct. 15 he promised that the lot would be cleaned within five days, but again there was no action.

Baggett called again, pointing out that Evans had given his word several times but the work had not been done. The junk was finally removed Oct. 26.

"We had won," Baggett says, "because we were persistent."

(Stagnaro did not return The Examiner's telephone calls.)

Other churches have gone to the Board of Equalization about liquor store permits and have talked with the police and District Attorney Arlo Smith about dope dealers, put together 300 meals for Thanksgiving and organized black churchwomen.

The project is able to obtain such neighborhood backing because it has taken the time to do its homework, following the techniques taught by nationally recognized community organizer Mike Miller of the Organize Training Center.

The methods emphasize democratic participation, learning what people in the neighborhood really want and then going after it. Leaders also teach how to determine whom to talk with in a bureaucracy and how to analyze which approach to use.

Taken together, the churches and labor unions form an impressive alliance. The denominations include Roman Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, Episcopal, Methodist, Community and Church of God in Christ. The labor unions include the San Francisco Labor Council, San Francisco Federation of Teachers, Building Service Employees Union, Department Store Employees, Hospital and Institutional Workers, Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders Union, International Ladies Garment Workers Union, International Longshoremen's & Warehousemen's Union, San Francisco Firefighters and Theater Unions SEIU.

The project is funded by foundations and its organizational members.

Walter Johnson of Department Store Employees Union Local 1100, which represents some 6,000 members in San Francisco, says he sees the San Francisco Organizing Project as a way of dealing with the most complex times he has lived in. The churches and the unions have a joint constituency, he says, and the organization is helping build understanding between the two institutions, church and state.

Tuesday evening the group will hold its first delegate assembly at the San Francisco Labor Council, 15th and Folsom. Delegates from the member organizations will meet to vote on what projects they want to undertake, what stands they will make. After that it will be up to a steering committee to implement the decisions.