

A Journey from White Space to Pro-Black Space

by Isabelle Moses

Internal transformation in the direction of racial justice does not occur merely by applying traditional methods. New thinking is required, and the leadership of Black and Brown women is an important part of the equation.

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ow do you infuse racial and gender equity throughout organizational culture and practice? How do you make it a shared responsibility rather than one person's job?

Not unique to my job or my organization, these are questions that I wrestle with every day. For nearly five years, I have worked at Faith in Action, the nation's largest faith-based, grassroots community-organizing network. I previously served as a management consultant and executive coach to Faith in Action's leadership team, and came on staff to bring that expertise in-house. My current role as chief of staff requires me to think daily about how to build an organization that ensures that Black, Indigenous, and people of color—and Black women and women of color, in particular—are set up to thrive. A large part of my responsibility is working with our leadership teams to address our internal systems and structures that have perpetuated inequities and inhibited our team from fully living into our talents and aspirations.

One might like to believe that an organization like ours—one that has a fifty-year track record of building power in low-income communities of color across the country—might have had a head start in this area.

Not so.



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The reality is that Faith in Action, like many historically white-led organizations, has had to undergo its own internal change process so that our organizational leadership and staff teams truly reflect the communities in which we live and work. As an organization, we have grappled with the truth that systemic racism is the fundamental obstacle to our collective liberation, and when we really grappled with that truth, our whole organization had to change to reflect the aspirations we have for society.

This challenge is hardly unique to Faith in Action. Like many of our peers, we have experienced the consequences of shifting to more intentionally recruiting and hiring leadership and staff of color without fully addressing underlying systemic inequities. These inequities often inhibit us from thriving when we're offered opportunities we haven't been offered in the past.

When I was hired, it was largely because of organizational failings in this area. By the middle of the 2010s, Faith in Action, which back then was called the PICO National Network, might have been practicing "race-conscious organizing" externally, but internally the transformation had yet to fully manifest.¹ We were hiring more frontline staff of color, but when it came to the organization's leadership, even five years ago this was still a white-led nonprofit, including a majority of the board of directors.

We have come a long way, but we have hardly figured it all out. Our journey includes both the lessons we are learning and many open questions.

And given the scale and scope of our network, it is an important story to tell. The Faith in Action network operates in

twenty-seven states, El Salvador, Haiti, and Rwanda. Our network includes forty-five affiliated federations that are independent organizations. Our national organization collaborates with federations by offering leadership development in the form of training and coaching, political analysis, and deep partnership in developing and executing organizing plans and strategies. We also raise and regrant millions of dollars each year. We focus on a range of issues, including voting rights and voter engagement, immigrant justice and citizenship, and economic and criminal justice.

THE DAM BREAKS

In the spring of 2017, a group of fourteen Black directors—all of whom had leadership roles with national staff and affiliated organizations of the Faith in Action network—gathered in Dallas, Texas, for a retreat. The agenda was designed to focus on opportunities for collective fundraising. But this would prove to be no ordinary fundraising retreat.

During the discussion, several Black women raised a red flag: In recent years, a disproportionate share of Black women had quit or were transitioned out of affiliated organizations or national staff in the network. The conversation shifted to the question of how a faith-based, grassroots community-organizing network lives its values and ensures that Black women and women of color more broadly are set up to thrive—knowing that when Black women are thriving, it's more likely that everyone is thriving (as the theory of *targeted universalism*, developed by Dr. John A. Powell, articulates²). It became clear that, while fundraising still mattered, understanding and addressing the experiences of Black women was an even higher priority.

As the Black directors explored the catalysts behind the departures of Black women, several demands of the leadership of national staff emerged. These included: carrying out an external assessment of the state of Black women across the network; hiring a human resources director to instill values-aligned systems and practices; ensuring access to professional development for Black executive directors; adding a Black woman to the executive leadership; addressing racial and gender disparities in allocation of regrants from the national organization to affiliates; and creating a Wisdom Council to bring restorative justice practices to personnel (and other) conflicts that arose within the network.

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I joined Faith in Action's national team soon after this retreat. My position was in large measure a response to a call from Black directors who wanted to see greater focus placed on setting Black staff up for success, especially Black women. Over time, my role evolved to become the director of organizational development and, more recently (as noted earlier), chief of staff.

My own path to Faith in Action was somewhat unusual. I completed an MBA degree—not your typical training for a community-organizing network—and spent the first couple of years of my postgraduate career in management consulting with for-profit corporations, identifying opportunities to increase profit or operational efficiency. Getting laid off in the middle of the 2008–2009 financial crisis was the wake-up call I needed to recognize that a job that contributed to racial and economic inequity was not for me. For the past decade, I've supported strong and vibrant organizations at the leading edges of racial and economic justice. While Faith in Action still has a long way to go in our process of becoming, we are striving every day to create an internal culture that lives our values of justice, power, and love.

**NEW LEADERSHIP SETS AN
AUDACIOUS VISION—AND OFFERS
A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION**

Faith in Action had been led by two white men—first, Father John Baumann, the founder of then-PICO, and second, Scott Reed—for its first forty years. Both had many accomplishments. At the same time, Reed's retirement opened up space for new leadership and new thinking. In May 2018, Rev. Alvin Herring was hired as the network's new executive director and the first Black person to lead the organization.

When Rev. Herring arrived, the organization faced a number of issues. Among these were:

- Financial challenges
- Women of color throughout the network feeling slighted and unseen
- A culture of silos without shared vision and direction
- An unwieldy national network that had grown out of existing systems and structures

- A need to reshape governance and develop a collective approach to organizing that centers wisdom and lived experiences of people of color

One of Rev. Herring's top priorities was to take the time to deeply listen to the pain of Black and Brown women on staff who felt that our contributions to the organization were undervalued. The network engaged a consultant to complete a report on the state of Black women in the organization that sought to understand the underlying themes behind the disproportionately high rates of turnover of Black women, both on national staff and within our federations. (More recently, we have completed a similar study with our Latinx staff.) Our organization took all of these actions because we believe that to change organizational culture, we first have to understand it.

After the initial listening round and about a year into his tenure, Rev. Herring set an explicit goal that Faith in Action would become the best possible place to work for people of color. This was not a small declaration.

The last three years have been all about moving from vision to implementation. This meant a comprehensive effort to transform the culture of the national staff team through self-examination around race and gender, and riding the national momentum that is asking leaders to operate with greater accountability to the communities we care about. The vision offered by Rev. Herring has guided much of our approach to ensuring that our organization lives our values.

Several changes have been implemented regarding national staff over the past three years:

- Strong fiscal responsibility and a renewed focus on fundraising have propelled us to the healthiest balance sheet we've had in the organization's history.

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- People of color now serve in all seven positions on the executive team (five women, two men).
- To recognize the leadership and talent that already resided in the organization, key staff of color who had labored in the network for years received significant promotions. This freed up long-tenured team members who weren't always in positions of power and influence to bring their deep learning and ideas to life.
- Throughout the organization, we have implemented the Zulu concept of *sawubona*. Literally, the phrase means, "I see you," but more broadly it means an organizational commitment to respecting our common humanity.³

In addition, within the network, more than half of our affiliate organizations are now led by people of color, of which a high percentage are Black women and Latinas.

The goal, in short, has been to shift from a white-dominant and patriarchal culture to one where more people of color, especially women, have access to decision-making rights and influence over the continued evolution of both *what* we work on and *how* we work collectively. It's about considering every day how to design an organization for liberation and not oppression.

ORGANIZING HUMAN RESOURCES AS IF PEOPLE MATTER

In this process of internal organizational transformation, we are learning many things. One perhaps obvious—yet sometimes hidden—point is the need to recognize that racial trauma affects a large portion of our staff. This means we have found that we need to intentionally create space for healing and well-being. This has many practical human

resources implications that community organizing networks—and, dare I suggest, other nonprofit and for-profit organizations—ignore at their peril.

Our chief people officer, Crystal Cumbo, has been a steadfast champion of this work. In response to the set of requests from Black directors, she also joined the national staff as the first human resources professional in our organization's fifty-year history. She has made it her mission to ensure that Faith in Action practices its values through our organizational systems, structures, and policies. For example:

Compensating staff equitably. One of our big wins over the past eighteen months is the completion of a compensation and benefits study, so that all staff are paid equitably and competitively relative to the market for similar positions at similarly sized organizations. This was a huge feat and required the participation of the entire team in order to complete updated job descriptions that would serve as the basis for analysis. Ultimately, we landed on a new compensation framework that has structured salary bands by job function and guarantees that people who perform similar work are paid similarly across the organization. We are also ensuring that staff are paid at least at the median of the market. Due to our recent financial turnaround and strengthened balance sheet, we are also able to make salary adjustments to account for any inequities that emerged across our team.

Prioritizing staff well-being to avert burnout. During the pandemic, we have made every effort to prioritize staff well-being and to make sure that our annual leave policies were not a barrier to staff getting the time off they needed. This builds upon our long-standing commitment to family-work integration that we piloted in 2019, with a practice of no meetings and no emails on Fridays.⁴ While we aren't perfect at this, the program has greatly increased our team's ability to slow down, reflect, and handle personal priorities.

We've regularly surveyed our staff during the COVID-19 pandemic to hear feedback about what's working and what additional supports are needed to ensure staff well-being. As a result of the feedback, we closed the office for a total of four weeks in July and December 2020 and January 2021, so that staff could recharge and focus on themselves and their loved ones. And in 2021, we decided to implement a

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two-week holiday break in December (adding a second week to our usual holiday break), and have codified this as a standard practice going forward. Rather than pushing just a little bit harder, we recognized the need to take the foot off the gas, and that addressing burnout *required* time to recuperate. Ultimately, we believe that we will liberate ourselves *if* we create the conditions for everyone to stay in the work over the long term rather than creating conditions for constant churn in the mode of treating people like disposable parts. With the support of a diverse and dynamic leadership team, we can express our liberation by owning our ability to choose rest over work.

Investing in leadership development and caucus spaces.

This meant engaging leadership development practitioners to support our leadership teams. It also meant working to strengthen our caucus and cohort spaces, including our Black caucus, Black women’s caucus, Latinx cohorts, Asian Pacific Islander (API) Caucus, and white caucus.

One of my proudest bodies of work over the last two years has been stewarding our Black women’s caucus space to codesign and implement a curriculum focused on supporting Black women to own our power more fully while also healing harmful societal conditioning that has uniquely impacted Black women through the intersection of misogyny and racism, known as *misogynoir*. We engaged Dr. Chaniqua Walker-Barnes to understand and unlearn many harmful aspects of the StrongBlackWoman archetype as described in her book *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*.⁵

Phyllis Hill, our national organizing director, has worked with Black women directors and organizers in the South to cocreate the Black Southern Women’s Collective, which is a space for collective visioning, fundraising, professional development, community building, and healing. In this space of shared leadership and imagination, they have developed a strategy that recognizes that organizing is both about meeting the needs of everyday people in response to crises (such as in the aftermath of hurricanes) and about building long-term political power for Black and Brown communities (as demonstrated by high rates of voter turnout in Georgia during the November 2020 and January 2021 elections).

THE NEED FOR NEW THINKING

The shift that has occurred at Faith in Action would have seemed impossible when I joined the organization five years ago. We have been working hard to walk our talk: centering the voices of those closest to the impact of issues we work on, both in our externally facing organizing as well as in our internal organizational practices. We are striving daily to move toward a deeper emphasis on self-determination and collective liberation. We are aiming to center the wisdom and experiences of people of color, especially women of color, at all levels of our organization.

This includes learning from organizing ancestors who look more like us—including Ella Baker, Cesar Chavez, and Fannie Lou Hamer—rather than only operating out of the frameworks of white organizers, such as Saul Alinsky. It also includes incorporating wisdom from living systems—such as that shared by adrienne maree brown in *Emergent Strategy*.⁶ How do we move more like a flock of birds and share nutrients more like interdependent tree roots?

Since joining Faith in Action, my beliefs around organizational systems and structures have shifted significantly. I have begun to realize that many of the capitalist-oriented models and practices I was trained to implement were not working for our aspirations. For example, how do we think about a long-term shared vision and shorter-term goals that are defined more at the team level than at the organizational level? How do we hold healthy tension between the elements of “top-down” hierarchy that are needed for clear decision making, while also responding to the “bottom-up” wisdom of our grassroots leaders?

Recently, in response to the receipt of an unexpected transformational grant from MacKenzie Scott, Rev. Herring tapped Denise Collazo, our chief of external affairs, to lead a network-wide commission to inform how best to use the funds. This is a first step toward taking on the challenge of engaging many stakeholder groups (grassroots leaders, network and national staff, and boards) across language, distance, and many time zones in more democratic decision making. Here are the commission's three overarching recommendations:

- Become the global spiritual and political home for BIPOC people and our coconspirators who aspire to build multiracial, multifaith democracies
- Invest in a new generation of community organizing leadership by amplifying the voices of Black and Brown women across the globe
- Make this money make more money

It seems they're off to a great start.

In short, internal transformation in the direction of racial justice does not occur merely by applying traditional methods. New thinking is required, and the leadership of Black and Brown women is an important part of the equation. There remains much work to do. We recently wrapped up a listening campaign to hear from leaders and clergy in our

global network to build our vision for the next ten years around our collective wishes and aspirations.

We know that Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous communities have the insights about what we need to thrive. Faith in Action wants to activate and equip people to be the authors of our own liberation. We believe wholeheartedly that we are the ones we've been waiting for.



NOTES

1. See Steve Dubb, "National Network Leader Looks Back on 40 Years of Community Organizing," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, May 2, 2018, nonprofitquarterly.org/national-network-leader-looks-back-40-years-community-organizing/.
2. "Targeted Universalism," Othering & Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, accessed January 22, 2022, belonging.berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism.
3. Valeria Sabater, "Sawubona: An African Tribe's Beautiful Greeting," *Exploring Your Mind*, last modified November 15, 2021, exploringyourmind.com/sawubona-african-tribe-greeting/.
4. Denise Padín Collazo, "Tackling Family-Work Integration Head-On to Keep Women of Color in the Work," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, August 20, 2019, nonprofitquarterly.org/tackling-family-work-integration-head-on-to-keep-women-of-color-in-the-work/.
5. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).
6. adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

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