WHY SHOULD ASYLUM HILL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

SUPPORT THE ASYLUM HILL ORGANIZING PROJECT ?

--A statement by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire, Chairperson, Asylum Hill Organizing Project Sponsoring Board, to the Board of Christian Service, Asylum Hill Congregational Church, January 11, 1983

I very much appreciate the opportunity you have given me to discuss the importance of the Asylum Hill Organizing Project (AHOP) with you. My purpose tonight is to convince you that the Asylum Hill Congregational Church should give $10,000 to support AHOP for calendar 1983.

I realize that you have just alotted some $10,000 for a hispanic ministry, that you have other sizeable fixed service commitments, and that you are already deeply involved in the community through your tutoring programs, your Saturday morning program, participation in Asylum Hill Christian Community activities, such as our Street Ministry and the Soup Kitchen, as well as other things. Also, I know that your resources are not unlimited.

Still, I want to present you with what I believe is a historic opportunity to extend and to strengthen your ministry in the community.

To that end, I will address myself to the following questions: Why should there be organizing on Asylum Hill? Why should the Church support organizing? Why should the Church support AHOP? Why should the Asylum Hill Congregational Church support AHOP generously?

Why Should There Be Organizing on Asylum Hill?

You are well aware of the urban context in which we minister. Some 65 per cent of the people in the city are on public assistance of some kind. Perhaps 40 per cent of the people are below the federally defined poverty level. The actual unemployment rate is probably more than 20 per cent; for minority young adults it is probably around 40 per cent. The city's infant mortality rate is shockingly high, compared to surrounding areas. The city has one of the highest crime rates in the nation. There is a zero vacancy rate for affordable housing for middle and low-income people in the city; in the meantime, due to deterioration, on the one hand, and condominium conversion, on the other, the available number of affordable dwellings is diminishing daily. Notwithstanding the heroic service of numerous individuals, moreover, the public schools are generally poor -- with many drop-outs. Family and neighborhood support systems, likewise, are often fragmented. Religious ties, too, are -- to put it kindly -- not what they used to be for many folks. Along with all this, other signs of desperation and community malaise persist, above all prostitution and drug abuse. Overall, therefore, Hartford can sadly be judged to be "one of the eight most distressed cities in the nation."

Asylum Hill itself has some 12,000 residents, 10,000 of them renters. Many of these are elderly. A whole range of people, young and old, are both economically and spiritually depressed. The average stay in the neighborhood is two years, or less. This is a symptom of the community's fragmentation and sense of powerlessness. Few people want to stay here, for long. Few people are looking to "put down roots." Most seem to be trying to protect themselves, survive, and then get out as quickly as they can.

Cosmetically, Asylum Hill is an attractive place, for the most part. It has many strengths, too, its cultural, racial, and economic diversity, for example. Likewise, a number of corporations have attempted to prevent the neighborhood from deteriorating into a total wasteland over the years. People debate how

effective that corporate involvement will be in the long run, if it continues in its present course; effective, that is, in bettering the lot of the majority of the poor who live in the neighborhood. But there can be no question that at least a few major corporations stand ready to support a continuing process of community improvement. These are some of the strengths of the neighborhood.

We can call the environment in which most of the neighborhood's residents live, however, a circle of poverty. It is a closed circle, by and large. All of the problems which cause such distress in the neighborhood tend to reenforce each other. Poor education and weak family ties lead to poor employment prospects, for example; and since the labor force does not appear to be at hand to work in Hartford's largely high-tech industrial establishment, firms tend to look to the suburbs, and actually move there, in order to find employees. And so on.

I dare say that the lack of hope among people in our neighborhood, a spiritual condition of despair, may be the most basic element, the cement, as it were, which holds people imprisioned in the circle of poverty. That's why the ministry of the Churches is so decisive, or can be, in our neighborhood.

But the ministry of hope is not enough! People who are totally isolated, unemployed, ill-housed, and abused by crime cannot readily hear the Gospel. No one can live by bread alone, surely. But people do need bread.

The new Soup Kitchen, which the Asylum Hill Christian Community and AHOP are developing is therefore a step in the right direction. It is both tangibly and symbollically important. We are committed to feeding the hungry and to caring for the poor generally. At the same time, the situation requires more than this kind of one-to-one immediate relief. The ministry of hope entails a ministry of help, and that help must be extended with a view to long-range as well as short-range needs.

It is indeed "much better to teach a hungry person how to fish than to give him or her a fish."

If hope is going to be a reality the poor in our neighborhood can actually experience, they will need to be able to see tangible signs of hope of their own making, and so begin to be able to reach out for their own particular promise.

Gifts are not enough. The welfare/grants economy of the Federal Government has been highly problematic in recent years. Nor is charity for the poor that much of a help in the long run either. This simply puts off the problem until tomorrow. The poor have to be able to help themselves. If we always try to do it for them, they will never experience their own ability to change the world, they will continue to doubt their own dignity as children of God, and they will not be inclined to take risks as they reach out for their own promise.

Therefore we need organizing in this community, the grass-roots development of the people, a participatory process which can elicit a new sense of neighborhood solidarity and hope,and some experience that their own power can work to change things for the better.

Why Should the Church Support Organizing?

I want to translate the Church's chief ethical norms now, into one concrete statement (for those who care about such things, this can be called "a middle axiom").

As Christians, we are called to love God with all we have and to love our neighbors as ourselves. I translate this in the following way for us today: God wants us to be good stewards of the opportunities he gives us to love our neighbors.

If we lived in first century Rome or in the Soviet Union today, we would have very little opportunity to change things. Maybe, if we were fortunate,

we could serve those neighbors geographically near us, individuals whom we would know personally. But in a totalitarian society, that's all you can do, for the most part.

Living in a free society, however, we can do much more. We have many more opportunities to love our neighbors than the citizens of totalitarian societies. We can speak freely in public and join in free associations. We can communicate with other groups of citizens, and organize to pursue the causes of justice. Likewise, our Churches in this free land can -- judiciously -- help to support those kinds of activities, particularly as they focus on help for the poor, whom our Lord has commanded us to serve.

I assume that the Church will, for a whole range of good reasons, never want to side, as the Church, with any political party on a permanent basis. That kind of association is always fraught with dangers. I assume that the Church will consistently want to "stay out of politics" in this sense. It will not want to endorse candidates, and so on.

But at the same time, I believe, we will rightly want to look for opportunities to get the best return on our neighbor-love investment. Yes, we will try to feed the hungry. But how much better, when we can, to help the hungry feed themselves, so that next week, next month, next year, they won't need to depend on us any longer for assistance!

For such reasons, the Church will as a matter of course be open to supporting organizing projects which help the poor help themselves, as well as attempting to respond to their immediate needs. Indeed, as good stewards, we will want to seek out such opportunities actively.

Why Should the Church Support AHOP?

I refer you to the AHOP brochure, What is AHOP?, for a profile of this vital community organization, which has sprung up right in our own backyard.

In a very short time, since February 1, 1982, folks associated with AHOP have been able to set in motion a number of active, participatory community groups: Seniors for Action in Asylum Hill, Huntington-Sigourney Tenants Association, South Marshall Association of Tenants, Woodland Village Tenants Association, the Prostitution Committee, and others. These groups have worked individually, and jointly at times, on issues such as crime, prostitution, unemployment, and housing.

Much of AHOP's work has happened on a small scale, in response to particular neighborhood needs, such as work to gain code enforcement in certain buildings. Other projects have been more public: busing 300 folks to a City Council meeting, for example, to speak out for more police protection in the neighborhood.

We are looking forward to a "Community Congress" this spring, when the present start-up phase of the project will be terminated. Our Sponsoring Board will go out of existence then, and a Community Board will be elected by the community itself.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this project, compared to other similar endeavors, has been the involvement of the Churches right from the start, along with important, albeit indirect support from the corporate community (mediated through Asylum Hill Incorporated). The majority of Sponsoring Board members are from the Churches. In this vein, we anticipate that people from our Churches will continue to play an important role after the Community Congress.

AHOP, then, is not an ideological "we against them" kind of organizing project. It is not predicated on a divisive spirit (as look-alike projects have sometimes been in other cities and in other neighborhoods). Its intent is to involve all segments of the community in the betterment of the neighborhood.

Of course there will be controversy! That's the way most important things

in our lives are, even in our Churches, even in our homes! When you care about things deeply, you will probably disagree with others, from time to time. Also, there is understandable frustration, anger, and impatience in the hearts of the poor. Those who have no power and who live in a state of constant distress often -- rightly! -- have a short fuse. But all of us ought to be mature enough to understand that, and mature enough to see beyond the times of controversy, when they occur, to the goals of community betterment and solidarity.

The Churches, indeed, so integral to this project, can serve as agents of reconciliation. To begin with, our Churches are made up of members who are wealthy, members who are poor, and members who are in the middle. We are, by choice, laboratories of reconciliation; and therefore we can offer our good offices, in this context, to the community and to those who are on the coporate and political side of things.

Our Church members have already functioned in this way in some critical instances. At one point, for example, a public meeting with city officials and some corporate representatives "got out of hand"(as everybody now agrees). The meeting was not planned that way. And, as I witnessed it myself, the "yelling," such as it was, was initiated by a member of the City Council. But, without going into such details, my point here is that our friends in the Churches, who have the trust of community people and corporate people, were able to help the situation move forward by working behind the scenes.

Confrontation, then, is not "an AHOP tactic." The goal is dialogue and negotiation. But I should add: I do not rule out confrontation as a last resort. I anticipate that there will be confrontation if the parties involved cannot negotiate with each other in good faith. But, when you think about it, that's all powerless people have to fall back on. Money talks. That we know. But they don't have any. So they have to let their voices to the talking and their feet do the walking, when that's all that's left to them. But this should surprise no one. It's a phenomenon as old as the Declaration of American Independence and as young as Martin Luther King's Poor People's March.

Still, I think that Church participation in this overall process can help keep the process on track, keep it from polarizing unnecessarily, and avoid a bunch of futile confrontations. That's one reason why I am so excited by the way AHOP is developing as a neighborhood organization.

In a word, then, the Church should support AHOP for two reasons: first; because it is THE viable organizing project in our neighborhood; second, because Church participation is an integral part of AHOP. As members of the Church we will as a matter of course seek out and support the kind of opportunities for organizing and reconciling that AHOP presupposes and promises.

Why Should Asylum Hill Congregational Church Support AHOP Generously ?

Perhaps you will permit me to tell you someting about Congregationalism!

When I drive into a small New England town, I see the "Church on the Green." And I feel good about that.

From the very earliest days in this country the tradition of Congregationalism has guided individual congregations to play a central role in local communities, serving as a community center, as a place where the people could come to talk about -- to organize! -- seeking to redress their grievances, as a community of people generally and generously committed to justice in the town and beyond. The Church on the Green has, in this sense, been a profoundly significant value-shaping agency for public policy, an often decisive advocate for justice and for freedom, and a supporter of the downtrodden.

When I drive out Asylum Avenue, I see your Church -- and I think of that grand tradition! I know how you all have been a force for good at the

center of things all along, and I dream how you might renew and expand your own commitment to be the Church on the Green, in these times of economic, social, and spiritual crisis in our neighborhood.

Supporting AHOP, I believe, is a historic opportunity for Asylum Hill Congregational Church to reaffirm its own identity in a new way.

And more. We are most grateful for the $2000 you gave AHOP in 1982. But I believe that you will want to support AHOP still more generously in 1983 as you come to know and to appreciate this process more deeply. Why? Because of those to whom much has been given much will be required. This is why we are asking you for $10,000, which is the minimum amount we need from you. In terms of financial resources, your congregation stands head and shoulders above all other churches in this neighborhood. Even given your many other laudable commitments, compared to others you are capable of giving such a grant. No other Church really has such resources. And AHOP desparately needs that amount.

I urge you to hear the force of the Pope's words in this connection, when he spoke to America in New York some time ago: that we Christians should be ready to give of our substance, not just of our abundance. The people of Asylum Hill need this generous investment of your neighbor-love -- because you are capable of doing it!

Finally, I believe that it is in the self-interest of your mission to offer AHOP such generous support.

You are deeply immersed in the ministry to individuals in this community: pastorally; and offering them support through the Soup Kitchen, the Street Minister, and your tutoring and clothing-store programs, among others. Impressively, in the same vein, you have begun a hispanic ministry, in order to reach out to the members of that community with the proclamation of the Gospel.

But where are you going to send these people once you have reached out to them with the ministry of hope?

Will they go back to a life of poor housing, no jobs to speak of, inadequate schools, fragmenting family, drugs, prostitution, crime, violence in the streets and all the rest? Will that be the world back into which you will send them? Having fed the hungry, will you drop them off in a world where there is no food?

Or will you also invest in the neighborhood itself, so that the people themselves can sustain their families, go to work, know and trust their neighbors, rejoice in their children's education, and put down roots where they live, and maybe even stay long enough in Asylum Hill to join our Churches so that they, inturn, can spread the ministry of hope and the ministry of help?

I challenge you tonight to resolve anew to minister to the neighborhood as a whole, by supporting AHOP generously, as well as by continuing your generous support for the ministry to individuals in which you are already so deeply and so commendably involved.