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Organizational Pursuit of a Beloved Community

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Organizational Pursuit of a Beloved Community

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Abstract

The following paper is an examination of three organizations, Vamos Puerto Rico, The Well CDC, and the Karen Community of Akron, who are working towards the betterment of their community by fighting the injustices that their communities face. In this paper, I argue that the choices made by each of these three organizations, reflected in their organizational structure and the initiatives they focus on, can be understood as linked to the common goal of the beloved community when examined through the framework of the six steps of nonviolent social change. The steps of nonviolent social change are information gathering, education, personal commitment, discussion/negation, direct action, and reconciliation and, through their implementation, they represent people-focused social change and its complexities and how these organizations are working to effectively catalyze their communities toward a beloved community.

Organizational Pursuit of a Beloved Community¹

This paper is an exploration of three different organizations, Vamos Puerto Rico, The Well CDC, and the Karen Community of Akron. Each organization has its own specific pathways and initiatives geared toward finding and creating solutions for problems that face their different populations. Though their specific tactics differ, they have the commonality of working inclusively to bring people together to support community solidarity and well-being. Each organization is addressing problems that come from distinct paths and cultural contexts. However, the specific goals that each organization has set out for their communities, if attained, will result in that community having progressed significantly toward a beloved community which is a community where all are welcomed and invited to join a movement of people where love triumphs over hate and peace triumphs over violence (The King Philosophy, 2018). In King version, this community, is not a community of people where conflicts and disagreements do not happen; it is where the value of those in disagreement is recognized and respected². It is a community where people are prioritized. These three organizations are each responding to their own circumstances, with one common theme: they could describe their current situation as a form of homelessness in the sense that home, or the place they belong, has been subject to negative forces seemingly outside of their control. Each of the three organizations are deploying tactics that reflect their unique journeys, cultural contexts, and leadership choices. At the same

¹I would like to thank the readers of my project, Dr. Lyons, Dr. Behrman, and Dr. Lee, for their input and advice throughout the process of completing this project and during my time as an undergrad.

² Evidence of this is reflected under the section titled: Linking Organizational Goals to the Beloved Community.

time, my analysis³ indicates that all three organizations are focused on treating the conflicts they face as opportunities to rebuild an inclusive and loving community in ways that overlap with Dr. King's six steps of non-violent social change and reflect aspirations to create a beloved community.

“Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth” (The King Philosophy, 2018). It is all inclusive and built upon love. Love in the form action that fosters growth. An example of this is in what Cornel West says, “that justice is what love looks like in public.” When says this, he is building upon both King's aspiration toward a beloved community and King's strategic focus on finding a non-violent pathway to that community. These three organizations are fighting the injustices that face their communities; they are working to bring people together in solidarity to demonstrate love by creating a more just society. They are creating a beloved community by fighting for home through the collective power of these organizations and the people they represent. The power of the beloved community is with the people of the community coming together to create change. They are the force working to diminish the disparities that they and their neighbors face by creating a more just society.

Through specific choices about organizational structure and action-initiatives outlined below, we can see the ways that each organization combats injustice by serving as a catalyst bringing people together. They are empowering people by demonstrating love in their

³ Data for this paper was collected through participant observation. I worked with each organization for a time participating in their initiatives and learning about the history and context of their communities to understand what they were trying to do and how they intended on doing it. This paper is an attempt to apply the framework of the steps of nonviolent social change from The King Center to my observations about each organization and their specific initiatives. The intent is to demonstrate that though their work is different, it is ultimately moving these communities in the same direction towards a beloved community.

communities. The love I observe them demonstrating is a powerful and interactive type of love, similar to the type of public love and community power King described as inescapably linked to justice when he says, “Love without power is anemic and sentimental. Power without love is reckless and abusive.” These organizations are creating and using power to elevate justice, to fix the problems that their communities face, and to create a sense of home and belonging for all who live in the communities that these organizations serve.

Context

The context for each of these organizations is important because it shows the injustice that each community has faced and currently faces. It gives insight into why the organization is set up the way it is and also why certain initiatives are chosen. Understanding the context shows that these organizations did not spring up from nothing, but are targeted attempts by people to fight the injustices that face their communities through Vamos PR’s circles, The Well CDC’s housing initiative, and The KCA’s community educational events.

Vamos Puerto Rico

For Vamos Puerto Rico, the context is the colonization of the island. Puerto Rico has had a complicated history with the United States since it was acquired as a colony from Spain during the Spanish-American war in 1898. When the practice of owning a colony became unpopular within the international community, the United States coercively convinced the people of Puerto Rico to vote for status as a commonwealth in 1952. The description changed, but the relationship remained essentially the same (Font-Guzman, 2010). The significance of this event was that

there was no longer the international pressure on the United States to relinquish colonial control over the island, and has since remained the same, even becoming more oppressive.

The oppressive nature of the United States' relationship with Puerto Rico has manifested itself in many ways throughout the years including the illegalization of the Puerto Rican flag, the assassination of Puerto Rican nationalists most notably Filiberto Ojeda, the military's bombing of the island of Vieques, and a range of more subtle economic controls (Font-Guzman, 2010). Puerto Ricans were granted limited U.S. citizenship shortly before the United States entered WWI, meaning Puerto Ricans could be drafted, but still they could not vote (Font-Guzman, 2010). Their second-class citizenship is evidence of Puerto Ricans not being seen as fully American.

Puerto Rico's colonial history is a key factor in what has led them to their current political, economic, and social problems. They are \$72 billion in debt and unable to file for bankruptcy (Lopez-Santana, 2017). Corruption within the Puerto Rican government is a huge factor in what caused the debt to become so monumental (Slavin, 2016), and, to add insult to injury, some of the people implicated in the corruption that caused the debt are now a part of the fiscal oversight board that controls Puerto Rican government spending (Cornwell, 2016, Lopez-Santana, 2017). Puerto Ricans refer to the fiscal oversight board as *La Junta*. *La Junta* is part of the PROMESA act that President Obama instituted which puts even more limits on an already limited Puerto Rican "democracy." (Lopez-Santana, 2017)

Dr. Isa Rodriguez Soto sums up how colonialism has stolen home for citizens of Puerto Rico by utilizing the island for resources with little to no concern for those lives of the people who live there and the communities they create, with this, "Puerto Rico has always existed at the

margins of the empire; a nation where people have always had to fend for themselves knowing that the empire constructs a narrative in which we are a burden to cover up the reality that we are a resource to exploit” (Rodríguez Soto, 2017). There exists a sentiment of dependency from Puerto Rico to the United States, a colonized mindset. The irony is that the colonial link is a key factor in the problems that the island faces.

Vamos Puerto Rico is an organization that is working to create a movement to counteract these trends to reclaim their home, and empower the people of Puerto Rico to come together to fight injustice to create the island where all residents can thrive. However, what they are seeking to build-up is more than just a place where all residents can thrive, it is a place where the people play an active role in ensuring their home is an environment conducive to fostering growth. Vamos PR is working towards an internal decolonization, as in the mindset of dependency on the colonial power, while they are systematically addressing the economic, political, and social issues that plague their island. They are using and highlighting the power that the citizens of Puerto Rico do have to empower, decolonize and eliminate injustices, to reclaim home by showing them that it is something they are in fact capable of accomplishing.

They are decolonizing by elevating people instead of oppressing them. Started by a group of 3 dreaming of a community for all of Puerto Rico where the worth and value of all is recognized, they wish to expand to 30 circles, to 300 people to 3,000 to 30,000 a number so large the movement will be unstoppable. Vamos PR specifically chose the structure of their organization to work as an antidote to colonialism. The power is decentralized through the circles, which are the groups that meet to address various problems, and therefore the organization is not solely reliant on one source. Essentially it is a collaboration between many

initiatives across the island to address the various social, economic and political woes. People specifically address the problems that they believe they can and need to address, and together it equates a larger movement working towards the greater good of a decolonized Puerto Rico. What is important about this structure is that Vamos PR is not replacing a power and therefore becoming the new colonizer. It is building up the people's power and their realization of what they are able to do. The context shows us why an organic, decentralized movement is the approach that Vamos PR is taking.

The Well CDC

The context for The Well CDC is Middlebury, a neighborhood in a city that has struggled since the decline of the rubber industry. Middlebury is currently one of twenty-four neighborhoods in Akron, Ohio (Akron Neighborhood Profiles, 2016). It was the original settlement in the area and officially joined the City of Akron in 1872 (Jenkins, 2018, City of Akron, 2018). Today, it is one of the lesser known areas of the city, many people consider it forgotten. There is no reason for one to go to Middlebury unless one lives there. There are no signs that welcomes travelers to Middlebury. Many people drive through the area to get to work or downtown, but since the decline of the rubber industry the neighborhood has largely been neglected (Jenkins 2018, City of Akron, 2018).

“Forgotten” refers to a lack of investment in the area from local government and businesses, and a lack of awareness from Akronites about the neighborhood. Socially and economically the neighborhood is in decline. Middlebury has faced a 30% population decline since 2000 (The Well CDC, 2018). With little economic opportunity there exists little incentive

for someone to live in Middlebury. Many who do live there don't own their homes, and may rent under poor conditions because there are not better options available to them.

Though the neighborhood is largely forgotten, there are still people who live there whether that be because they have always lived there and/or there are no other options available to them. The Well CDC was created with the realization that something needed to change because more of the status quo would result in the continuous and steady decline of the neighborhood which is not only bad for the people who live there, but it is bad for the city as a whole. As a response, The Well CDC is looking to improve the neighborhood as a whole while keeping the residents of the place a priority in all of their endeavors by creating opportunities to partner with them whether that be through employment or through input and feedback.

As a response to this context of being forgotten, Zac Kohl started The Well CDC, and there is now a staff of five to run the building and their various initiatives. The Well CDC's initiatives aim to put Middlebury back on the map. Through creating economy, supporting place, and restoring housing, they are working as a catalyst to help Middlebury residents reclaim their neighborhood to be an area where people are welcomed into and proud to be from, a place where residents are proud to call home. The effort is a collaboration between Middlebury residents, the city as a whole, organizations, and businesses because it is understood how working together can benefit all parties involved in a more comprehensive way than simply going at it alone. The Well CDC is working to enable the Middlebury neighborhood to claim its part of a thriving city.

The Karen Community of Akron (KCA)

The context that the KCA is working in is one of displacement. The Karen people are an ethnic minority from the country of Burma/Myanmar. They have had to flee their country due to persecution from the state controlled by the Burmese ethnic majority (Smith, 2016). They fled to Thai refugee camps in Thailand right across the border to the East. Then from the camps many of them applied, through the United Nations High Committee on Refugees, to be resettled (Karen Refugees, 2006). The Karen have been sent to the United States, Canada and Australia for resettlement. Often refugees can request to be sent where family members have already been resettled which offers them an existing support structure as they move to a new country (Karen Refugees, 2006).

The neighborhood of North Hill in Akron, Ohio has a community of resettled Karen refugees some of whom arrived in 2006 and others who are more recent arrivals. They faced barriers one might imagine when moving to a new country. However, on top of these barriers, the Karen community also had some sort of falling out with the primary refugee resettlement agency the International Institute of Akron. The falling out lasted from around 2008-2012 which prevented them from benefitting from some resources and making connections in their new home to help the community not just survive, but also thrive in this new place (Powley, 2015). This relationship has since been reconciled.

As previously mentioned, the first group of Karen came to Akron in 2006. In the United States, five years after being resettled, refugees are expected to apply for citizenship. Many of the children of the Karen that have been resettled in Akron, have been in school, some dropped out, some are pursuing degrees in higher education. Many struggle with health problems that

they may not understand well enough to treat or feel the need to treat, for example diabetes. The older population still struggles with English skills. Many other Akron residents are unaware of the Karen community's presence in their city. The Karen are creating home while seeking to create identities of both Karen and American.

There are varying levels of assimilation to life in the Midwest for different members of Akron's Karen community with the older generation naturally struggling more than the younger generation due to the language barriers. The goal behind creating the organization, the Karen Community of Akron, is to deal with the various problems that Karen community is facing by bringing the community together to address collective and individual problems collaboratively. While it existed a few years ago, nothing came of it. Now it is being Revitalized by Ajino Saw from a persistent desire to promote assimilation, but also maintain the preservation of Karen heritage, traditions, and language, to be engaged members of the Akron community, but also stay rooted in their Karen identity. While they pursue home they are also working to bring awareness to what happened to them in Burma with the goal of stopping it from continuing to happen.

The KCA is working within this context of displacement by working to unify a new identity for people who have experienced many different versions of home be that in Burma, a Thai refugee camp, or Akron, Ohio. The older generation has more ties to Burma while the younger generation has spent most or all of their lives in the United States. To keep the community together, strong, and thriving the KCA is working to bring the older and younger generations together to celebrate both identities of Karen and American.

All three of these contexts, the colonization, the state of being forgotten, and displacement, present differing problems and struggles, but the history of all three of these people and their places has resulted in the destruction, decay, or theft of these people's homes. As a result, in an effort to meet people where they are in order to catalyze the collective powers of these communities, each of the initiatives referred to above, as well as others outlined below, reflect their unique circumstances and choices. They are tailored to the history, culture and current contexts of these places. At the same time, each organization, through its structure and initiatives, are working to reverse the trends of injustice that has led each of these communities to their current day state by utilizing the steps of nonviolent social change.

Linking Organizational Goals to the Beloved Community

Each of the three organization's mission statements explain the specific aims that they are working toward in their communities. They demonstrate which injustices they plan on addressing in their communities, and provide a picture of the home that they are striving for; it's a picture of a beloved community.

Vamos Puerto Rico

The principles⁴ of Vamos PR are *sustentabilidad*/sustainability, *equidad*/equity, *solidaridad*/solidarity, *justicia*/justice, *participación ciudadana*/citizen participation, and *transparencia*/transparency, and the vision is;

⁴ The principles and vision statement for Vamos Puerto Rico were taken from their Facebook page which is written in Spanish. Their website has not been up since Hurricane Maria happened. The intent is to most accurately portray what the organization claims to be doing and working toward.

Comunidades saludables, felices y solidarias, apoderadas de la construcción de un Puerto Rico sustentable, inclusivo, equitativo y próspero para todos y todas. Happy, healthy, solidary communities empowered by the construction of a sustainable, inclusive, equitable, and prosperous Puerto Rico for all. (Vamos Puerto Rico)

Through their principles they are actively avoiding the pitfalls of the colonized Puerto Rico that has landed the island in its present-day situation.

As stated before Vamos Puerto Rico is a grassroots movement with the goal of the decolonization of Puerto Rico, specifically the internal decolonization of Puerto Rican citizens. What is meant by internal decolonization is the mindset of dependency the citizens of Puerto Rico believe that the island has on the United States. They are nation building by strengthening and empowering the communities of Puerto Rico utilizing the steps of nonviolent social change. A change from the current relationship that exists between Puerto Rico and the United States, with statehood, a treaty, or independence, is a necessary condition for a sustained, widespread decolonization of the Puerto Rican people, but currently it is too distant of a goal to wait for. Decolonization is a mindset; it is way of life, and Vamos PR is aiming to normalize it into an everyday way of life. Instead of overthrowing the powers that be, Vamos PR is creating or consolidating a new power by the unifying and the building-up of the people of Puerto Rico through the steps of nonviolent social change.

The goal of inclusivity stated in their vision statement highlights how what they are striving for is a beloved community. Inclusivity is exemplified in how the structure is decentralized. The process of decolonization is not straightforward, and, from what I witnessed during my time in Puerto Rico working with Vamos PR, it could be accurately described as a

process of detangling a mess of spider webs meaning it is complicated and tricky process. It is a process for both the colonizer and the colonized. It can be tedious work where the steps of nonviolent social change will continually have to be revisited. It is complicated, but it is a holistic approach where every Puerto Rican and every part of Puerto Rican culture has a role to play. They are creating something that people will be willing and want to buy into. The means are the ends in that they are getting to where they want to go by becoming what they want to be. Vamos PR is showing Puerto Ricans what many think is impossible, an independently sustained Puerto Rico. They are progressing through nonviolent means that will leave everyone better off than when Vamos PR started.

The Well CDC

The mission statement⁵ for The Well CDC and their general objectives for the neighborhood of Middlebury and the City of Akron as a whole are as follows:

The Well Community Development Corporation (CDC) will work with like-minded partners to create affordable housing, a thriving economy, and place-making initiatives, while reinvesting worth, value, and dignity back into the individual lives and social health of the neighborhoods of Akron. Rebuilding community through relationships.

Thriving Communities: Rust Belt cities like Akron were once bustling pockets that thrived with people, resources, and identity. We want to see Middlebury grow in a way

⁵ The mission statement for The Well CDC along with the definitions of Thriving Communities and Flourishing Individuals were taken from The Well CDC's website. The intent is to most accurately portray what the organization claims to be doing and working toward.

that encourages the community to take pride in the neighborhood and become a gathering place for the entire city.

Flourishing Individuals: Flourishing individuals is directly tied to the ability to decide for oneself. Our desire is to create opportunities for all people in Akron to achieve their dreams by leading healthy and liberated lives. (The Well CDC)

The Well CDC is a community development cooperation working to see thriving communities and flourishing individuals in the city of Akron. They are working towards this through three initiatives: creating economy, restoring housing, and supporting place. Akron has faced economic decline that is on trend with many other Midwestern cities. The Well CDC is looking to actively defy this trend in hopes of reversing it. The goal is progress specifically in the three areas that were identified, but progress that does not leave anyone behind.

Creating economy means increased job accessibility. What The Well CDC aims to do is support job creation and growth by supporting local entrepreneurs. Part of this is supporting local food entrepreneurs with the Akron Food Works initiative. For this initiative, though this is only one aspect of it, they are in the planning stages for an incubator kitchen. This kitchen would be a shared-use, commercial kitchen space that would give local food entrepreneurs the opportunity to grow their business by alleviating the burden of obtaining a commercial kitchen to produce their food in. Not only will the kitchen help sustain The Well CDC's operations creating sustainability for the organization, it will support and build local economy giving opportunities to those who may have not had the resources to start their business.

Restoring housing means they will be restoring or rehabilitating 60 houses over the course of 60 months. The goal is to increase homeownership and as a result increase investment in the neighborhood. They will also support homeownership by creating a community toolshed to help neighbors with the upkeep on their houses. They are also seeking to eliminate the slumlord culture by raising the accountability of landlords to adhere to laws and keep up their properties.

Supporting place is something that The Well CDC does through Compass Coffee. It is a space that is there to meet the needs of the community. Compass Coffee provides a gathering place for anyone from business people having a meeting to homeless people relaxing, to college students doing homework. The Well CDC is also exploring the potential of creating a basketball court for the neighborhood. The purpose of supporting place is to give the community a place to gather and increase pride in their home.

Through the three initiatives of creating economy, restoring housing, and supporting place, The Well CDC is creating opportunities for the neighborhood of Middlebury, but also the City of Akron as a whole. Information gathering is a major first step for all of these initiatives because they are not seeking to reinvent the wheel. Their goal is not to give the place meaning, but rather they are acting as a catalyst for the people of the place to create meaning by encouraging personal commitment, providing a space for discussion and negotiation, and creating outlets for direct action. They want Akron and specifically Middlebury, to be a place people are proud of by unifying a strong, vibrant community of all people. “Rebuilding community through relationships” as stated in their mission statement truly gets to the heart of

the pursuit of a beloved community through the steps of nonviolence by demonstrating an intent of restoration through their initiatives.

The Karen Community of Akron

These are the aims of the Karen Community of Akron taken from the bylaws. The steps to nonviolent social change can be identified throughout the various aims⁶ of the KCA.

- to provide an educational platform for meeting, discussing, and identifying possible solutions of any issues of common interest or concern which affect directly or indirectly the Karen community.
- to promote mutual understanding and cooperation among the members of the community
- to preserve and promote this Karen community's culture and traditions,
- to help build a healthy and mutually respectful relationship with other communities,
- to promote public awareness about the Karen community,
- to assist Karen students in attending college or trade schools,
- to promote public and private health education within the Karen community,
- to raise funds through solicitation, donations, and work for projects identified as important by the Karen Community of Akron, Inc.

⁶ The aims of the KCA has been taken directly out of the bylaws which I assisted in editing. They do intend on translating the to the Karen language. The intent is to most accurately portray what the organization claims to be doing and working toward.

The Karen Community of Akron is an effort to organize and create opportunities for the resettled Karen refugee community in Akron by assimilating to life in the United States of America while preserving Karen culture and traditions. The KCA recently obtained 501c3 status from the state of Ohio late last year, and is spearheaded by Ajino Saw. Within the context of Karen culture, it is significant that Ajino Saw is heading up organizing the KCA because he is younger and the elders of the community had to relinquish power to allow him to take on this effort of leading the community. Because of his age, there is a heightened need for him to prove himself to the Karen population in Akron, and as a result prove the value of the KCA to the Karen people.

There are significant language barriers for the older generation of Karen peoples which is why Ajino was permitted to take on such a leadership position for the community, but also why the KCA as an organization is needed. Without speaking the language there are many added obstacles for living in the United States. It is also one of the barriers that the KCA seeks to address, to give the older generation more agency that comes with higher language proficiency skills. However, the KCA also seeks to connect the older generation with the younger one.

Part of maintaining this multigenerational connection is to make sure the youth have adequate support to get their education, but also learn about their Karen heritage. The KCA has started to do this by recently recognizing those in the community who have graduated high school with a celebration to show that it can be done and it is something the community values as worth doing. The celebration was to help support and grow the bond between parents and their children by celebrating their victories and showing support for their future. Connecting the older and younger generations is important for sustaining a strong community. The celebration also

provides an opportunity for the Karen community to gather together and celebrate, which is important in community ,while, at the same time, the celebration is setting an example to the those still in school that graduating is an attainable and admirable goal.

Then, to connect the Karen community to the greater Akron community, they have started hosting a New Year celebration at the Summit-Country Main Branch Library. The entire city is invited to a celebration of Karen culture. This year's celebration had the city of Akron's Mayor Daniel Horrigan in attendance. This celebration is an important opportunity for the Karen community to gain exposure to the rest of the city because it is not uncommon that other Akron residents know little to nothing about the Karen people or that they live in their city. Connecting to the greater Akron community and organizing protests in Washington DC is how the KCA exercises their identity as US citizens.

The direct action of going to Washington DC to protest the lack of intervention from the Unites States to prevent the crimes against humanity that are currently being committed against the Rohingya is the fusion of their Karen identity and American identity. What is happening to the Rohingya, is what happened to the Karen. They went to Washington DC once already and plan to go again June 18. These protests are direct action as well as personal commitment on behalf of the KCA. They understand what it is like to be brutally forced out of their home to survive, and they don't want any other humans to experience that. This protest is in remembrance of their past but also an embrace of their new identity as citizens of the United States of America in an exercise of their civil rights.

Overall, the goal of the KCA is to help the community thrive by eliminating barriers they face due to having been forced out of their home to live as resettled refugees. They are shaping

the identity of what it means to be both Karen and a United States citizen, of what it means to be a member of both the Karen community and the Akron community. This goal is significant and will take time, but an embrace of both identities is what will make this community thrive. It will help them to create a beloved community.

Initiatives

The mission statements of all three of these organizations are different because of the different contexts that each community provides. As a result, their specific initiatives to address the injustices that face their communities differ, but they all have commonalities in the use of steps of nonviolent social change in pursuit of a beloved community. All of these organizations are building solidarity and inclusivity through their use of the steps of nonviolent social change by building their communities up and bringing people together. They are creating the communities that they want by becoming what it is they want to be. In this, the means are the ends. While they are implementing information gathering, education, personal commitment, discussion/negotiation, direct action, and reconciliation, all three organizations are striving towards the picture laid out by their vision statements.

The Six Steps of Nonviolent Social Change⁷

The Beloved Community is a “human community built on love” (Jenson, 2016). It is an ideal that can be authentically pursued through the way one constructs their life. MLK believed that nonviolence was the way forward. The King Center defines the principles of nonviolence as

⁷ The six steps of nonviolent social change, information gathering, education, personal commitment, discussion/negotiation, direct action, and reconciliation, have been taken from The King Center.

a courageous way of life where friendship and understanding is sought after. People are not defeated, injustices are by choosing love over hate. Suffering can educate and transform and ultimately the universe is on the side of justice (The King Philosophy, 2018). Living by the principles of nonviolence, one approaches life prioritizing people. Implementing these principles through an organizational structure catalyzes nonviolent social change.

The principles of nonviolence are what guides the implementation of the steps of nonviolent social change which are information gathering, education, personal commitment, discussion/negotiation, direct action, and reconciliation (The King Philosophy, 2018). These steps are not a way to advance one's personal goals and ambitions. They are a way to elevate people and bring them together for a better world, for a more just world, for a beloved community. These steps can be seen in the organizational structure of Vamos PR, The Well CDC, and the KCA and the initiatives they put forth to address the problems in their communities.

These six steps of nonviolent social change have been extracted from MLK's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (The King Philosophy, 2018). These steps are written as a response to power, specifically oppressive power, and an explanation of the way people can nonviolently change the status quo when they are not the ones in the position of power. Due to their context and the structure of the organizations, the organizations examined in this paper have attained different levels of power and influence in their communities and over the external systems and forces that impact them. While different levels of power and influence will change the dynamics of how the six steps are enacted, they are still applicable. It is important to also note that some of the wording used by The King Center to explain the steps speaks of a clearly defined opponent in the way of the attainment of the goal. In the cases of these organizations, the "opponent" is not

always clearly defined. It is important to keep in mind effective nonviolent social change works to defeat injustices, not people. They are working against systems of oppression and as a result who and what the opponent is, is not always clearly defined.

Information Gathering

Information gathering helps to lay the foundation for the rest of the work towards social change. To solve a problem one must understand the problem. Understanding the context, history and culture of each of the areas these organizations are working is key. The issue must be examined from all sides. Information gathering will help in determining how to go about addressing the problem. It will also equip those working toward nonviolent social change for the next step of education and sharing the information that has been gathered.

For Vamos PR, this looks like attending meetings with farmers to learn about the feasibility of food sovereignty for the island, or meeting with an economist about what needs to change for the island to become self-sustaining. For The Well CDC, it means talking with other community organizations who have been doing the similar work longer, or bringing in a kitchen expert to assess whether their kitchen space would work as a shared-use kitchen space. For the KCA, it looks like enlisting the help of someone who has dealt with government bureaucracy before to file for 501c3 status, or the help of someone who has run protests before to help organize a march in Washington DC. Each organization must seek to understand the causes of the injustices in their communities, how and why they are perpetuated, and the pros and cons of various solutions.

Education

Education is the next step in nonviolent social change. The goal is to educate all people, whether they are part of the community facing these injustices or they are outsiders. It is in part sharing the information already gathered, but it is also partly encouraging more people to engage in information gathering, to take the responsibility themselves and continue the education about the problems that their community faces. The goal of education is to help people better understand the problems that the community faces so that the injustice does not persist through ignorance. Increased comprehension of the current problems and injustices, empowers people to address them and continue in the steps of nonviolent social change.

Vamos PR is very big on education, and they approach it with a philosophy that everyone has something to bring to the table. This idea that people are not empty vessels to be filled inspires the structure of Vamos PR. They have different circles which are groups that meet based on a specific location or focus. Each group addresses the problems they feel the need to in the manner they see fit. The education each circle provides is dependent on what issue they wish to address. For example, there is a *Dialogo Boricua* that occurs once a month with the aim of intersecting Puerto Rican culture with another issue and usually a guest speaker is brought in to help the discussion. They discuss anything from special education to healthcare.

A major initiative that The Well CDC is working on is a shared-use incubator kitchen. Part of what is meant by incubator is that it will provide the right conditions to grow a business. This includes providing information and training that is often required when starting a food business. They will offer help and information on what licenses need to be obtained and how to

get them. On top of that, clients can be trained on how to use some of the more advanced equipment in the kitchen or even specialty skills like canning.

For the KCA, there are many areas where the Karen community needs education to help them thrive in this society. A good example would be the immigration lawyer that was recently brought in to talk to the community about their rights and laws they may not understand. For example, hunting is a normal part of Karen culture, but Karen people are too often caught with a gun without a license. This lawyer explained to the community that they need a license for the gun and a permit to hunt. He also talked about them not needing to speak to the police if they are stopped to prevent them from incriminating themselves.

Education is used to empower the community, but it is also used to highlight to those who don't experience it, the injustice that the community faces. Education is a crucial part of the nonviolent social change process because if people do not understand why something needs changed, it is highly unlikely that they will be motivated to change it. Education comprehensively highlights injustices and exposes it so that actions can be taken to defeat it.

Personal Commitment

Personal commitment stems from the acknowledgment that this type of work is long and hard. It is easy to become discouraged. Personal commitment is the drive to persevere in face of obstacles. The personal commitment of these organization can be seen in the leadership of each organization. There is a level of commitment there that comes from whole heartedly believing in the work you are doing, the need for it and the outcomes it will produce. The leaders of these organizations have dedicated much time and energy into the work their organization does, not as

a conscious effort towards the next step of nonviolent social change, but a natural progression in the effort to improve their communities.

For Vamos Puerto Rico, Justo Méndez Arámburu travels all over the island talking and communicating with different circles and recruiting different members. He is the general coordinator of the whole organization's operations and plays a key role in unifying the different circles. For the Well CDC, Zac Kohl created the organization so it could be his job. The work that The Well CDC is doing is the work he does to support his family. For the KCA, most of Ajino Saw's efforts come out of his spare time as he must work another job to support his family. Though this commitment looks different he is still fully committed to the organization. The organizations that are able to support a staff are more efficient in executing the initiatives they desire to implement.

On top of the personal commitment from the leaders of the organization, there also needs to be commitment from the community members as they are working to build a strong community. As shown in the context of all of these organizations, the work is tough. It is important to remain committed through setbacks and difficulties because the end result, a beloved community as home, will be so worth it.

Discussion and Negotiation

Discussion and Negotiation refers to directly addressing the injustice the community faces and those who perpetuate it keeping in mind the point is to draw out and build upon the good not simply highlight the bad. This step works to keep up the important dialogues around the problems being addressed and to start implementing possible solutions. Discussion and

negotiation builds off of and informs the previous three steps therefore requiring learning and education with personal commitment to be done well. Discussion and negotiation helps to sustain the work being done so the issues are not simply forgotten after information gathering and education has occurred. It is the start of collaboration between all parties involved to implement a solution. It keeps the conversation going.

Discussion and negotiation is something that Vamos PR implements very well. Its purpose is to decolonize the island meaning either statehood, independence or a treaty with the United States. The how behind the decolonization can be a dividing factor among Puerto Ricans, but Vamos PR aims to unify them around the fact that they all want a prosperous and thriving Puerto Rico. Discussion and negotiation allows for productive conversations and solutions to problems without getting tripped up on differences.

The Well CDC does a lot of community listening to what the residents of the Middlebury neighborhood want and need, but they are also connected with the City and their plans for community development in Akron. What the Well CDC does is provide a connection for Middlebury to be heard by the city and vice versa. They also connect with other organizations serving the neighborhood through Neighborhood Network meetings that occur monthly along with one-on-one meetings with the leaders of other organizations. The Well CDC with discussion and negotiation is an example of where the power dynamics of the situation are different than they were for MLK when he wrote the letter. The Well CDC does not have to force those with power to listen to them, they have the ear of the local government. While they are not in complete control it should be noted that they have gained a significant amount of influence

through obtaining a significant grant from The Knight Foundation (The Knight Foundation, 2018).

Discussion and negotiating looks different for the KCA because their operations are much smaller than both Vamos PR and The Well CDC, but it is exemplified in their annual meeting to hear from the community and inform them about what they are working on. The KCA would also do well to extend more discussions to the other church in the Karen community to do more to bridge the divide between them and become more unified. Also more events to connect them to the rest of the city is crucial for them to expand discussion and negotiation.

Direct Action

Direct action is the action taken to address injustice and bring attention to it when those perpetuating it do not work with you. It should be noted that clearly these are not independent steps, but choices, actions and structures that co-exist at the same time, mutually informing each other. They rarely develop in a linear fashion. Evidence of this is most clearly seen in addressing direct action, since the planning, implementation, and subsequent evaluation of each action depends on and then informs future information gathering, educational work, and leadership choices. Many steps can be happening at once and even be revisited and repeated as the work for a beloved community is pursued. The more effort put into information gathering, education, personal commitment, and discussion/negotiation, the more likely the direct action is to have beneficial impacts.

These initiatives for Vamos PR look like running a citizens' campaign to audit the debt or the call to artists for the *Verde Luz* project to reclaim Puerto Rican art culture. For The Well

CDC, it looks like the nonprofit coffee shop, Compass Coffee, where the proceeds fund the housing initiative where they are working to restore respectable housing conditions to the neighborhood by eliminating the slumlord culture and creating reasonable pathways to homeownership. For the KCA, it is hosting a fundraiser to fund their trip to Washington DC to protest or their annual New Years celebrations for the Karen and the greater Akron community. Direct action is essentially putting in work and making a collaborative effort to force the hand of change.

Reconciliation

The integration of these six into one holistic strategy is even more apparent when we consider Reconciliation, since this is both an analytical step and an overarching objective. It is both a metric used to structure each step and an expression of a deeper aspiration, linking efforts to a beloved community. Reconciliation is an end goal, but it is also a key part of all of the previous steps. At every point while working for nonviolent social change, the focus should be on righting wrongs and bringing people together through friendship and understanding. Reconciliation is the true test of the organizational structure and various initiatives of these organization. It can be seen in the community that each organization is serving and whether or not they have progressed towards their goals, whether or not they have progressed towards creating a beloved community.

Conclusion

What each of these three organizations represents is an effort by members of a community to address the problems they are witnessing in their communities. They are working to publicly love their communities, to help them grow, by bringing justice to them. Each organization is addressing problems that have resulted from the specific plight of their community. Though the specific initiatives may differ, each organization is progressing towards MLK's vision of a beloved community. They are going about getting there by utilizing the steps of nonviolent social change through their organization's structure and specific initiatives.

Vamos PR is working towards a beloved community in a heavily colonized context. As a result, they are consciously empowering community members to address problems that they see facing their community. The power structure is decentralized so that the organization successfully rids the island of colonial rule instead of simply replacing the colonial power. They are utilizing the steps of nonviolent social change to reclaim their home through decolonization efforts. The collaboration of the various efforts that makes up Vamos PR has the potential to make an incredible impact. This impact could be broadened through support from partners on the mainland, not just from the Puerto Rican diaspora, but also others with voting power who don't wish to maintain colonial rule. Broadened awareness on the mainland through education could have the potential to exponentially further their cause of decolonization.

The Well CDC is working towards a beloved community in the context of a neighborhood that has been forgotten. Through their three initiatives of supporting place, creating economy, and restoring housing, The Well CDC is working to put Middlebury back on the map by community development through relationships working to see thriving communities

and flourishing individuals. Exercising the steps of nonviolent social change will allow Middlebury to be put back on the map as a beloved community. While The Well CDC has the resources to elevate the living conditions of the neighborhood, currently the organization is more so in the neighborhood, but not of it. For them to truly keep the people of Middlebury the priority of their initiatives, they must continue to put forth the effort of collaborating and connecting with the lifelong residents and those who are living in the neighborhood but not by choice.

The KCA is working towards a beloved community in the context of displacement. They are working to unite the generations of a community by embracing the identities of both Karen and American. They seek to eliminate the barriers that come from being displaced so that the members of the community cannot just survive in their new home, but thrive. They are utilizing the six steps of nonviolent social change to unite the Karen of Akron and connect them with the greater Akron community to create a beloved community where all are welcome. The work for the KCA is long and hard as they need to earn legitimacy in the eyes of Karen people of Akron to truly become impactful. They are overtly breaking down cultural barriers and continuously need unify and collaborate, understanding that it is a learning process for them.

All three of these communities know what it is like to be cast off in a sense. They understand the problem and injustices that come from not being a part of the group in power. This perspective they have shapes the way they formed their organizations and the initiatives they pursue. It is what guides their use of the six steps of nonviolent social change, and it will be what attracts more to join them in their work towards a beloved community.

Lastly, while there are analytical advantages to thinking of these as discrete steps, particularly as we try to learn from what other organizations have done, it is also important to

recognize that, in-action, the boundaries between these steps blur and the decision making is neither linear nor formalistic. The steps can be understood as elements of a holistic approach to a dynamic process. While these elements can be drawn out of the processes that these different organizations take, they are different in their concrete application depending on the context and the power dynamics of the situation. However, throughout all of it the principle of reconciliation remains constant through the need to prioritize people to continue on the path toward a beloved community.

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