



CCJP

CATHOLICS IN COALITION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

Catholics in Coalition for Justice and Peace
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'How can Civil Society be strengthened?'

**Edited Transcript of Address given by
Sr. Maribeth Larkin 17th November 2013.**

About Sr. Maribeth Larkin:



She is in Australia at the invitation of The Sydney Alliance. "The Sydney Alliance brings together diverse community organisations, unions and religious organisations to advance the common good and achieve a fair, just and sustainable city. The Sydney Alliance is a non-party political organisation."

Sr Maribeth has been a leader and to the forefront of similar civil society organising work in the USA through One-LA - <http://onela-iaf.org/>

Introduction

It's really a privilege for me to be with you today. I have always enjoyed coming to a new place as an organiser, because as I've done that I've met the finest people curious about how do we create change in our society. So thanks for the opportunity to be with you so we can have some time to talk together and to get a better perspective on the Sydney Alliance.

About Sr. Maribeth Larkin

Let me start by telling you a little bit about me. I'm a Sister of Social Service. My congregation was founded in the 20th Century. We were founded in Hungary in 1908. Our foundress Margaret Slachta was very inspired by *Rerum Novarum*, the Papal Encyclical of Leo XXIII, about what was happening to people as they transitioned from an agrarian society to an industrial society. Many, many people were going to work and there was lots of exploitation of workers, particularly women and children.

She was the first woman to serve on the Hungarian Parliament, when she began to discern a vocation to religious life. Through her spiritual director she decided to start an order. She stayed on in the Hungarian Parliament for another term. In many ways she was really a pioneer of women's issues and women in leadership.

Margaret Slachta is also one of the Righteous Gentiles because during the Nazi occupation of Budapest our houses and other houses, were turned into homes in order to be able to hide Jewish people. We have a Sister, Sara, who's now on the way to sainthood because she and five other women who were running one of these houses and they had Jewish children that they were hiding, and they got raided. Thanks be to God the children were able to get out but six women, including Sara, were marched down to the Danube and shot.

I feel like my religious tradition through the Sisters of Social Service is very much an inspiration and in line with the kind of work that I fell into back in the mid 70s.

I was trained, as most of our Sisters are, as a parish social worker and I worked with low income, mostly Spanish-speaking migrants from Mexico and other parts of Central America. Our job as social workers in these parishes was primarily to do two things. The first was to assess them and provide emergency help for people who needed either food or maybe clothing or a voucher to find a place to stay at night. The more I did this type of work, assessing people, the more disturbed I became. It felt to me like we were spending more time scrutinising and less time really working

to support people. It was my experience that you might find occasionally somebody scamming the system but by and large people who come to the church come out of enormous humility and shame that they're in the situation that they're in. What they really need is a caring voice on the other side of the conversation and a little bit of support.

The other thing that I did as a social worker was to advocate. They people were being ignored. So my job would be to go with someone and we would go to the Welfare office, for instance. But when I walk in - guess what! *How can I help you, Sister?* Because I'm white, I'm from the Church, and I'm a professional. I have standing. That's good news to whoever I'm with because something's finally going to happen, but it is humiliating to the 100 people sitting there who have been sitting there and waiting for some kind of assistance.

The more I did that, the more I thought, Something is really wrong here. The importance is not me but because our institutions have standing in society. We get taken seriously. I just didn't want to continue with that, being complicit in a system that says some people count and others don't.

So I started to be very uncomfortable and frankly I don't know – I also have some problems with the clergy. I went through formation right after Vatican II in the late 60s, early 70s, and we have a very progressive formation because it really was in the spirit of Vatican II.

I also had our foundress, another Hungarian woman who came to the US with the Sisters and then had to come by herself to California because she had a respiratory problem and she couldn't live in Buffalo. She came to the Cathedral in Los Angeles and presented herself. Her name was Frederica Horvath. She presented herself to work, she wanted to work with families from Hungary and the Bishop said we don't have many of those but you can work with the Mexican-American population here in the parish. She did not speak English and she didn't speak Spanish, but that's the work that she began in 1926.

Our foundress, Sister Frederica, we were the last class that she spoke to and taught said to us in no uncertain terms, *We Sisters of Social Service are not handmaidens of the Church. That doesn't fit us, we're professional, we do a professional job as social workers, and you are to be taken seriously and you are to see that you are taken seriously, not as a handmaiden of the Church but as a professional social worker.*

The first pastor I got sent off to work *with* thought I was there to work *for* him. Literally. He came into the office one morning with a bag full of clothing and said, *Would you please take these to the cleaners for me.* I said, *I'm not the handmaiden of the Church.* He kept asking and I kept having to say to him, *No, I'm not here for that.* He wasn't even willing to argue with me. I didn't have a name; I was either 'the little sister' or 'the reverend mother'. That's what he called me.

We had a very difficult relationship and that was also part of what I was dealing with in that period of time when I was trying to figure out if I could stay in this religious life thing because it was so unlike what I had expected and kept saying to myself, *Is God trying me? Am I supposed to just do all this stuff? What is going on here?*

Thank God I had this really good spiritual director. He said, *You know, the problem if you leave that assignment is they're going to put another young sister in right behind you and it would be much better for you and for them if you came up with a different plan.*

So what we came up with was either I would stay there and change the situation and get a little respect, reciprocity, perspective on what I was there for, or I would be the last Sister of Social Service to go to that parish

I stayed there three years and I was the last Sister of Social Service to be in that parish, because things didn't change. But I became very different and that's where I started to recognise the importance of anger in the experience of standing up to that which is not right.

In the organising tradition we talk about the word 'anger' all the time and some people find that very difficult, because the image of anger is out of control emotion that often leads to violence. What I learned as we went through training is that the word 'anger' is rooted in a Norse word – '*ang*' is the word – and its meaning is 'loss or grief' and the emotion that comes out of a sense of loss or grief.

Anger is a response because we grieve over what is and what could be or what should be. We recognise the loss of dignity and opportunity and as I've learned anger is the most powerful emotion we have to overcome our fear. We learn the difference between 'hot' anger, uncontrolled anger, rage, and 'cold' anger, which is that deep sense of something is wrong here and this should not stand.

It's tied to this sense of action in the face of injustice. It's a highly misunderstood word and so it's a little risky to use unless you define it.

So I said I'm going to have to find a different way of being in ministry, and I started to hear of conversation that was going on in East Los Angeles, a very poor part of LA, among institutions, churches of various faiths and schools and community associations and a few labour unions, and the conversation was about building power. That's another word that misunderstood.

Power is the ability to act. That's what the word literally means, and it's a neutral term. You can act for the good or you can act for the bad. We tend to see it as 'power over', but 'power with', the idea that we take our capacity to act and our power as institutions and we put it together, we agree to stand together and stand to identify issues that need to be changed within our communities.

I knew the Catholic Church had a lot of power and I thought, yes, instead of just being about charity, which is important, we should also take the power we have and stand together with other institutions who want to exercise power to make changes in our society. Who want to teach people their own capacity to act.

That's what organising is, and as I saw day after day we were building an organisation in East LA, that is teaching people much less prepared for public life than me how to take ourselves seriously as public persons and to build relationships across the many things that divide us.

We are as societies very fractured because we don't know how to build trust across those things that separate us – things like race, things like language, culture, economic status, religious difference, geography. We opened up with remembering the land of the Aboriginal people. That tradition now is widespread in Australia, to recognise our brothers and sisters, and is testimony to the fact that we don't know how to do it, historically and even today, to build that basic trust and capacity to work together and not see ourselves as different – so different that we can't act together or to recognise our common amenity and our common concern about the kind of world we live in.

I work for an organisation called One LA in Los Angeles and I love the name because the name is the vision, in one of the most diverse cities in the world.

The Sydney Alliance

The Sydney Alliance is an organisation to bring together cross-sections of people and organisations in this big metropolitan area. Its aim is to teach people how to work together and how to stand up and challenge and change the systems.

You can't change them all but the important thing is if you build a relational organisation, if you bring institutional power together, then you have capacity to change many things and the discipline of organising is what do we have the power to change, as opposed to just running up against power where we lose. We get defeated, we get pushed back, and probably more important than what do we change is how this work changes people, because it gives them a different sense of who they are and what they need to put up with and how they can challenge what's in front of them.

First of all, it is challenging to help people who are very, very comfortable to recognise and understand that their situation is not everybody's situation. My experience is in every community there are people who understand that things are not the way they should be and want to find out if there are ways they can participate meaningfully in making things better, making things different.

We do steel ourselves from that which we don't know what to do about or that which we don't want to recognise as something that we have responsibility for, and the further away you are from it, maybe the easier it is to just not be moved by it. In Los Angeles, gated communities feel safe and secure locked away from the rest of the world. That's more and more what's happening in housing for the elites.

Audience: There are also some gated communities in Sydney.

That idea that we can pull away from the rest of humanity is just not what our faith teaches us. I'm not going to condemn anybody who lives in that kind of a situation but I hope they have some capacity to see that we're in this together. This is all of our world.

Audience: You were mentioning before that you became aware of various institutions, various churches, synagogues – I take it that they were not the hierarchical groups because it's like kicking your head against a brick wall often ... as your experience in your first parish. Was it groups of people within those institutions?

It was a mix but in most cases – when you're trying to bring institutions together the leaders of those institutions are going to have a lot to say about whether or not they want their institutional name being part of One LA or part of the Sydney Alliance. So we do talk to and try to include the leadership of these institutions, but the idea is, for instance, a Catholic parish, the pastor says, *Yes, I want my people to be involved in this* and then you start working with people and the broader you can get it inside

of the membership of the church, or even the communities that the church serves, that's what you're after, so we're bringing lots and lots of people together.

The organisations, in a sense, sponsor the organisational membership so that the community that surrounds that parish or that school or that community institution has an opportunity to participate together.

There are plenty of really good institutional leaders in our church. They often don't make it up to be bishops ...

Audience: Are you going to go any further? I thought you were part of the Sydney Alliance? Are you going to tell us what they've done and what they're going to do?

About two years ago I heard about the Sydney Alliance. All the work that I've done is part of the Industrial Areas Foundation, an institute for the training and development of leaders who want to participate in community organising. I was asked in 2012 if I would be willing to come to Australia and help with six-day training. It's an intensive course to look at what is organising and what are some of the skills and strategies that we use in order to be able to build these organisations and sustain them.

So I came in May 2012, again in November 2012, for about two weeks each time, and participated in the training. Then the director of the Alliance, Amanda Tattersall, asked me if I would be willing to come for an extended period of time. I thought, yes, that would be interesting. I've been here now for two months. My job here has been to join the team of organisers with the Sydney Alliance and to both participate in the work and help the organisers reflect on what they're doing and hopefully give them a little coaching out of my experience.

What is Sydney Alliance now?

It's 52 member institutions all across Greater Sydney. The institutions are churches and congregations of various denominations, including the Muslim Women's Association, including the Jewish Board of Rabbis, and a number of Catholic parishes, a number of Uniting churches, a number of Anglican churches, a lot of community institutions, community centres, the Settlement Services International are members, there's all kinds of different community groups and there's a number of labour unions that work with workers all over Sydney and in many different sectors: the nurses, the Cancer Council is a member, the Bus Train and Ferries Union. Unions NSW is a member and United Voice that represents the cleaners – they're all part of the organising, the construction workers, the CFMEU.

The partnership and the Alliance have identified a number of issues that are being worked on. Major work around public transit and trying to improve the conditions in many of the stations, improve the safety including back and forth from the communities that surround the stations and the stations themselves. There's been work around workforce training. The organisation was able to negotiate an apprenticeship program with the Mirvac corporation around the Harold Park development in Glebe and they've recruited Aboriginal young men from The Block to get enrolled in apprenticeships, a four-year apprenticeship with Mirvac.

There's negotiations going on with other employers in Sydney: Qantas, Lend Lease I think is another development company, trying to find ways to get employment for very severely underserved populations. One of our members is an organisation called Asian Women at Work and it represents women who work in sweatshop conditions doing piecework. We're negotiating to find apprenticeship slots for those women who are looking to find more stable, long-term job situations for themselves. Louise, what are some of the other things the organisation is involved in?

Louise: They've been negotiating for safe staffing standards on two or three of the interchange stations ... Parramatta is a big interchange station so they've been doing work on that. ... Liaison with the young people around Marrickville, Bankstown. Liaison with the police, with Andrew Scipione, Police Commissioner at the assembly before last and they were able to build the relationship between specific cultural groups of young people who are overly represented in those areas. They're trying to work out some way of relating together so that those young people are not being stopped on the streets and harassed more than they need to be.

Audience: I got involved in the beginning. I have a husband who's in care now and I'm an old night nurse and I thought I knew everything about disability, until you've got someone that's actually in a walker you realise how difficult it is to get around Sydney if you're disabled. Sometimes I just stop and park the car where I thought I could get him out. There'd be 'No Stopping', 'No Standing', but it was safe enough. Most people don't do that. I heard that the Alliance was responsible for finding seven spots within the city where people could drop off disabled people in safety. That's the last I heard. Where are the seven spots, and who is going to tell us?

Louise: I don't know about that but one thing that has been done ... they have parking rangers go around with cameras, booking everybody who stops outside a doctor's or a dentist's surgery. A huge meeting was held of 200 people in the Liverpool area; they approached Liverpool Council and the Council has put in a ten-minute drop off

and pick up zone outside all doctors and dentists surgeries in the Liverpool CBD, which is helping people do what you were trying to do with your husband.

Maribeth: I know there's an effort in Westmead around the Westmead Hospital complex to deal with that whole parking situation, which is a nightmare.

Audience: So you're probably saying that the Alliance is suggesting to people within your group to go out and have that power to do it yourselves, are you?

Maribeth: There are chapters, what they call districts, of the Sydney Alliance in all these areas. I was at a meeting with some Sydney Alliance folks and the Mayor of Liverpool about a month ago and the Mayor was announcing that they had changed the parking meters at that hospital in Liverpool so that the first 15 minutes is free. It's to allow people drop-off or pick-up medication. So there is some action under way and it's targeted in different communities

Maribeth: The Alliance is beginning a campaign to impact the issues around the state-wide NSW elections in March 2015. The more important thing from my perspective is that there's a real serious effort to understand what is non-partisan organising really about? How do you take a broad face of the community, with all the diversity when the Alliance is doing its work, and put that in front of elected officials so that they understand that their job as elected members of our communities is to represent the common good, all people.

In my country, we went through that mess where Congress actually shut down the government for a period of time and put a million people out of work. It was 40 members of the Tea Party, and because of the way our system is structured, they were able to interrupt and interfere in government functioning. That narrow partisan pandering that gets done in the name of politics is terrible. We shouldn't allow it.

I think organisations like the Sydney Alliance, because of the broad base of diversity, has the best chance to be able to get in front of those electives and demand a different kind of leadership and a different kind of outcome. Not only do they just pander to their narrow interests but they vilify everybody else, and just destroy the whole notion of democracy. It's gone wild in the United States. It's just disgusting.

I was shocked and ashamed at the Prime Minister's Sri Lanka posturing and there's got to be ways to get at that arrogance and challenge it and change it. Part of our work relies on people's willingness to participate in political life. When you see so much of that hostile leading, people run the other way. There's a bumper sticker in the United

States that says: *Don't vote, it'll only encourage them*. It's amusing but deep down it's tragic because politics, the meaning of the word is 'the polis', the city, it's the life of the city, it's the life of our communities, and if we can't recognise that that's our work, to build the kind of structures in society that respect people.

There's a wonderful book. The author is (I think he's Indian) Margalit and the book is *The Decent Society*. His thesis is a decent society is one whose structures do not humiliate people. If we think of how we put together a society and the many structures that we have in place that often are humiliating people. We have the capacity to challenge that, but we have to stand together and be representative of the many different cultures and communities that are here.

Audience: We had a delegation - it wasn't in the alliance - but it was a delegation of concerned citizens in Penrith, went to a Penrith Council meeting some months ago about the toxic waste dump that was being moved from Hunters Hill out to Kemps Creek. One of our councillors referred to the delegation at the back of the room as 'rabble'. I've taken that back to the Sydney Alliance ... we need to talk to this councillor, he's working for us, we are not rabble, we are citizens ...

Mari Beth: That kind of irresponsible name-calling – people get away with it until we stand up and say 'no more, we're not going to tolerate that'.

It's very foolish. Alinsky was a great one for using expressions that didn't really mean anything but when I first heard about Saul Alinsky – I never met him; he died in 1972 and I didn't come into this work until later in the 70s. He came into Los Angeles at the time when the Cardinal Archbishop McIntyre was dismissing the Immaculate Heart Sisters, taking them out of the Church because they were implementing Vatican II in a way that he didn't approve of. It was a very bitter time. There's a wonderful book by Anita Caspary who was the superior of the Immaculate Hearts. *The Courage to Hope*, I think, or *Witness to Hope*.

Audience: What happened to them?

They're a lay institute and they are now a mixed male-female lay institute that has continued to grow since that period, which was 1968. But some stayed and some had to stay on and were rewarded for loyalty.

Audience: a system where international relations is conducted on the basis of national interest, that's all the main things taken into account, and what happens outside that doesn't matter. I heard them talking about it on the radio this morning.

Even the aid that's given, they sit down and talk about how this is going to accord with our national interest ... if that's the way we're conducting national relations, that sort of attitude also carried back into what happens in Australia ... With the Sydney Alliance and its focus, we tend to talk about national and international issues. Are the organisation you're involved mainly on local issues?

Yes. Tip O'Neill, a very wise politician in the United States, said many years ago, all politics is local. Our ability to impact is really at the very local levels. Teaching people how to think about what are the issues and then who's got responsibility for those issues at the closest possible place, it's the principle of subsidiarity.

Sydney Alliance's efforts are to work on local issues throughout the Greater Sydney area working with councils and local governments, but also looking at state-wide policy and looking at state officials. This effort towards election in 2015 is to really have people understand what is the role of state members of parliament vis-a-vis these issues that we care about. So they can do a 'candidate accountability forums' where elected officials or those seeking office are brought into meetings with the organisation, not to talk about what they're going to do for you, but to respond very specifically and directly to questions in and around the issues that we've identified.

Personal stories become very powerful testimony to why things need to change, and then very specific questions, what we call 'pinning' questions, are asked of those seeking or holding office about what they will do, putting them in a position where the organisation is going to be here to make sure there's accountability around these issues after the election. *What we build are permanent organisations where people are not coming together just for a rally or just for a meeting; they're coming together as part of a process that changes the long-term relationship between the community and those who are in positions of influence about decision-making.* Most politicians don't like it, they don't have the free rein they feel they should have.

Audience: Is it known if they take any notice when they're elected, are they sticking to these things, or does it just dissipate?

It's up to the organisation. One question at an accountability session is: *Will you meet with us within 100 days after the election?* Then you work to make that happen.

In Los Angeles we had a big meeting in February of this year with the four mayoral candidates for Los Angeles. It's a very big, important political role. All four candidates came. A thousand people at a synagogue in West Los Angeles, but people from all over the city: African-American, Latino, lots of diversity and economic

diversity. All four of candidates made commitments about working with us on the various issues that we presented. The guy who was elected has already met with now the organisation and is following through with those commitments.

Audience: Is this our base as far as the organisation is concerned?

Yes. It's very unusual that elected officials would have to deal with such a diverse group of people who are all on the same page about the things they think are important and that you need to deal with.

Audience: They can't demonise them.

Yes, because what often happens is one community's interest will get played off against another community's interest, and they'll say this to the white folks; this to the black folks; and this to the immigrant folks; but we build intentionally a united front, as broadly representative as we can make it. It's never representative enough. Our communities are always growing and changing, but the work of organising is to constantly bring to the table people who want to find out what we're doing.

Audience: When the mayor goes back to his office, who does he have to work with there who may not support those ideas? What happens then?

Then we have to do the politics of what is needed to get this to move forward. One of the big issues in Los Angeles is public transport. We had a bi-election in 2007 to raise several billion dollars to increase public transit but the timeline for it was 40 years. So we looked at that and then when we had another election, we a looked to bring the timeline down from 40 years to 10 years. The Mayor of Los Angeles appoints the members of the Metropolitan Transit Authority board whose job is to implement that timeline, and we want to make sure that people who sit on that board are people who are going to be representative of the community, so that was one of the big issues that we put in front of those candidates. Now appointments are being made and we're seeing reasonably good results – never perfect.

Audience: Do they ever take action on wider issues ... ? I believe in a lot of states in America the Republicans finished up with a minority of the votes, but about three-quarters of the representatives in the House.

Yes, we have lots of attention to those kinds of decisions and it's very contentious. City council electoral boundaries, county electoral boundaries and then state – but our focus is usually as local as we can get it, to really be able to make the impact.

Audience: To what extent would business groups be part of the Alliances, because it seems to me they have a disproportionate influence on decisions made by local government or state or federal. I'd imagine there are very good people within those bodies. What about that level?

We make it our business to know business leaders and to know what their interests are in and around the issues we're talking about. We've done a lot of work in LA and other States where we're organised around health care, the Obama Care implementation. One of the things we did was organise a group of small businesses to get into a relationship with us because there were policies being developed about the size of the small businesses that would be covered under the new Obama Care legislation. Lots of businesses can't afford to insure their people but they want to. There was a lot of policies that would be put in place about how the new insurances available through small businesses. We had about 50 business owners who to us to help them understand how we could work together on this policy development.

The other thing is nobody's monolithic. Small business people sometimes go to church and have kids in schools. So looking at people's relationships beyond whatever we see first off is important. Finding ways to develop a relationship with people who have power in the business or government sector, is really important.

Audience: In your Los Angeles experience, how much is the media?

The media are really, really important and it's harder now than it's ever been to get stories well told, and particularly stories over time because so much of the print media is gone. Your guy bought it. Mr Murdoch has a big stake in the cathedral in Los Angeles. He put a huge amount of money in it.

We do outreach to media and business, but they've got to play by the same rules everybody else does. It's really about wanting to use your power as an institution to step up and create change. That's what we do. *Thank you.*

CCJP wishes to thank Sr. Maribeth for her motivating presentation and discussion.

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