

# Recovering Civil Society

by Kenneth O'Hare and James Troxel

As Chicago colleagues Kenneth O'Hare and Jim Troxel have researched effective models of public service within government, non-profits and local communities, they have discovered a new form of citizen participation in government taking root across the United States. Their work will form a chapter of the book, *The Rise of Civil Society*, due to be published to coincide with the 1996 ICA global conference in Egypt, on the same theme.

## *The Rise of Civil Society*

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**M**onroe, Louisiana, has been ranked the third poorest city over 50,000 population in the nation. Its citizens worked in earnest to complete an application for federal Empowerment Zone designation during the spring of 1994. Within eight weeks, over 1000 residents attended one of 20 community forums to inventory the assets of their county.

George Cummings, President of Monroe's Capital Bank and chair of the taskforce appointed to guide the process, reports: "The most important thing that's happened this spring has been the

relationships built and the seeds planted for long-term trust. People talked to each other for the first time. However, you can talk about issues like race relations all day but the way to deal with them is to pick a common problem and solve it together."

What's happening in Monroe may seem unusual but it's symptomatic of a new wave of participatory democracy sweeping this country. It's one aspect of a movement towards a "Civil Society," a term that captures a new spirit of community responsibility and public service. This movement is taking shape on two fronts.

One front is the recovery of a sense of community, as the Monroe story illustrates. American civic life is staging a comeback in the late 20th century that might strike some observers as improbable. Americans in small groups can be found forging new relationships with one another and with government. This quiet revolution has several different names and forms — community building, civic revival, national renewal. Revealing a mood that is anything but apathetic, people are organizing and acting, making impressive headway against the serious challenges facing their communities.

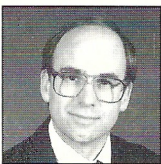
The second front is the empowerment of public servants. Again, evidence is more anecdotal than statistical. Wisconsin colleague, Meg Denman, provides a great example. Meg doesn't look like a revolutionary. Indeed, she doesn't even think of herself that way. But leading a revolution is what Meg is doing at the Waukesha County Department of Human Services. When the county president mandated each department to undertake a strategic planning process in which all employees would participate, Meg recognized an opportunity to act.

At the orientation, Meg realized her years of ICA involvement had prepared her to take on a facilitation responsibility. She volunteered to help, surprising herself and many colleagues. Her years as a human resource specialist and facilitator enabled her to guide her colleagues through a planning process which opened up internal communication channels and gave everyone a sense of belonging to the vision of the department.

We've asked a lot of public servants — stop crime, care for the needy, ensure equitable access to services by all, solve domestic problems, feed the hungry, care for the dying. In the midst of this, we see more and more heroes like Meg Denman in public service.

From observing these two and many other situations, it seems that a radical renewal of citizenship is the prerequisite for transforming government. When these two trends — community responsibility and empowered public service — merge in partnerships such as community policing, local school councils and citizen-driven town meetings, something powerful happens.

New forms of civic governance begin to emerge, forms that go far beyond cynical public hearings to genuine dialogue between citizen and servant. While these forms may be new to many of us, they represent a return to the idealistic principles of a civil society as envisioned by our founding fathers. ☉



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