

Keeping the Faith on Social Issues

The AIM Coalition Brings Power to The Grass Roots

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Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele (R) was impressed. Sitting in a Bethesda church one evening last month, he watched as Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) deferentially reported to more than 350 people filling the pews that he was making good on promises to provide more affordable housing.

Duncan was interrogated briefly at the podium before his turn was over. Then came Steele, whose time at the microphone was just as short.

The lieutenant governor told the assembled members of Action In Montgomery, a network of congregations that has become perhaps the most powerful grass-roots organization in the county, that he was making progress on an immigration issue they had raised with him.

For political leaders accustomed to being permitted an evasive answer and the opportunity to speak at length, the AIM treatment is bracing.

"I've never seen anything like it," Steele said last week. "They can get politicians to stand at attention, to pay attention, to be responsive, to account for their actions."

AIM has the sort of below-the-radar influence that can catch a candidate's eye -- Steele is running for the U.S. Senate, and Duncan for governor. Nearly 32,000 adults belong to the 31 churches and one synagogue that make up AIM, a veritable horde of potential voters in a jurisdiction where some 2002 County Council races hinged on a difference of a thousand or so votes. Last year, AIM drew more than 1,000 people to a single meeting.

The group brings together residents from across Montgomery, meaning that its meetings are ethnically and economically more diverse than most county audiences. And while its agenda is secular, AIM is organized around congregations, groups that politicians routinely court.

In seven years of organizing, AIM has achieved some victories, most notably in pushing the county to do more to provide affordable housing. Now it is preparing to become "the largest political turnout group Montgomery County has ever seen," in the words of the Rev. Pearl Selby, pastor of Oak Grove AME-Zion Church in Gaithersburg and an AIM leader.

Barred by law from making political endorsements, the group's get-out-the-vote drive for the 2006 election won't include backing individual office-seekers. Instead, AIM will define an agenda of issues and then let voters know how candidates measure up. Judging from the group's current priorities and discussions about future goals, that agenda will likely demand commitments to affordable housing, to making life easier for Montgomery's many immigrants and to helping those with limited access to health care.

Most advocacy groups bring together people who are concerned about a single issue, such as the environment or the pace of growth or sex education in the schools. AIM organizers, meeting one-on-one or in small groups with pastors and members of their congregations, bring people together and let topics for action bubble up.

"The issues aren't important for us," said Alisa Glassman, AIM's lead organizer. "The issues are just the glue to get people involved in democracy, to get them involved politically."

AIM is an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization founded in 1940 that says its "primary purpose is power" and its "chief product is social change."

While AIM and IAF affiliates seem on the surface to mix religion and politics, "they are pretty relentless that they are not trying to pursue a religious agenda," said Mark R. Warren, an associate professor of education at Harvard University and the author of a 2001 book on an IAF affiliate in Texas. "Faith institutions are arguably our strongest set of institutions in society, independent of government and independent of business."

'The Agenda Is the Person'

Mark Fraley, who served as AIM's lead organizer from 1998 to mid-2005, held hundreds of individual and house meetings to build AIM, each centering on some key questions: What's important to you? What values do you hold? What makes you angry? These discussions, he said, help build an organization that can be political without being partisan and yield an agenda that closely reflects its constituents' priorities. "The agenda is the person," Fraley said.

The IAF has 56 affiliates in the United States, Europe and Canada. Most of the groups are based in cities -- including Baltimore and the District -- although a handful reach into suburbia. AIM, said Jonathan Lange, a member of the IAF's national staff, is "very suburban" in that it wasn't founded as an adjunct to an urban affiliate. In the Washington area, the IAF is in the early stages of creating new affiliates in Howard County and Northern Virginia, Lange said.

AIM's budget for 2005 is \$227,500, which pays the salaries of two organizers and other costs. The money comes from congregations, which pay 1 percent of their operating

budgets up to a limit of \$10,000, and from nongovernmental grants. "You can't hold politicians accountable if they're paying your salary," Glassman said.

The organization emphasizes developing productive relationships with elected leaders and government officials. Duncan said he embraced AIM from its early days in the late 1990s. "Faith-based advocates for social justice is what we need more of in our county," he said.

"I don't find [AIM] as negative or hostile or accusatory as some of the other groups sometimes are," said Elizabeth B. Davison, Montgomery's director of housing and community affairs.

Duncan's support led to some of AIM's most concrete successes: a council vote in 2001 to double the funding, to \$15 million, for Montgomery's Housing Initiative Fund, which is used primarily to renovate and improve the county's affordable housing stock. That was followed in 2003 by a council vote to dedicate 2.5 percent of the county's property-tax revenue to support the fund each year.

Duncan pursued the increased funding at AIM's urging. Saralee S. Todd, a Duncan adviser, said, "It was AIM that brought the concept [of the dedicated funding] to Doug." And while the council initially rejected the funding mechanism in 2001 by a vote of 8 to 1, a 6 to 3 majority approved the idea two years later, following an AIM campaign that featured meetings that brought out hundreds of supporters of the plan.

Todd estimated that Duncan has met with AIM representatives 30 times since the late 1990s. Duncan said he meets with only one other citizens group -- the NAACP -- as frequently as he does with AIM.

Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) said Progressive Maryland, an advocacy group that promoted passage of the 2002 "living wage" law that Andrews sponsored, has been as influential as AIM, although he noted that the group is now focused mainly on statewide issues.

AIM has also backed successful efforts to improve taxicab services, especially for elderly residents, and to convince the county to offer developers the opportunity to build on some parcels of county-owned land on the condition that they include affordable units in such projects.

Steele and Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D) are assisting AIM in its effort to convince the federal government to open a full-service immigration office in Montgomery County to complement the district office in Baltimore. Because 66 percent of Maryland's foreign-born population lives in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, AIM and its supporters argue, Washington's Maryland suburbs need a full-service office to reduce the travel time and disruption for immigrants who are required to present themselves in Baltimore.

A spokesman for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency of the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees such offices, indicated that AIM may be reaching too high on this issue. "It doesn't appear feasible to locate a new office in that part of Maryland," said Bill Strassberger.

Immigrants in Hawaii and Alaska generally must fly to the nearest full-service immigration office, Strassberger added, and those in states such as Idaho and Maine must drive several hours each way.

Influence of Immigrants

The federal government may not see the logic of providing more services for immigrants in Montgomery, but an AIM-sponsored house meeting in Burtonsville last month made clear where the organization gets such ideas.

The session brought together 18 people, some from an AIM member congregation, the Church of the Resurrection in Burtonsville. Most of the meeting's participants were immigrants from Cameroon, Nigeria, Ethiopia and other African countries. The conversation focused on one participant's suggestion that the county provide a "welcome center" for new immigrants to provide referrals to employment opportunities, offer English instruction and advise newcomers on "how to navigate the system."

(The people at the house meeting were unaware that Montgomery already provides such services at its Gilchrist Center for Cultural Diversity in Wheaton and, to a lesser extent, at the Upcounty Regional Services Center in Germantown.)

Resurrection parishioners then brought the gist of the discussion to an AIM "strategy session" at Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church in Bethesda on Nov. 30, where many other congregations reported on house meetings of their own. The strategy session yielded a long list of issues, including health care for the uninsured, eliminating what participants said were ethnic and racial biases in school testing, and the need to continue helping immigrants.

Laurence A. Froehlich, a member of Kehilat Shalom synagogue in Gaithersburg and an AIM leader, ran a disciplined, good-natured meeting of 75 or so people that began and ended with prayer.

"For many people," he said, "for thousands, we are the only voice that they have to our political leadership."