

Chapter Four:
Findings — How Individuals Change Through
Valley Interfaith



“If you can change, and I can change, we can move mountains.”

- Valley Interfaith Leader

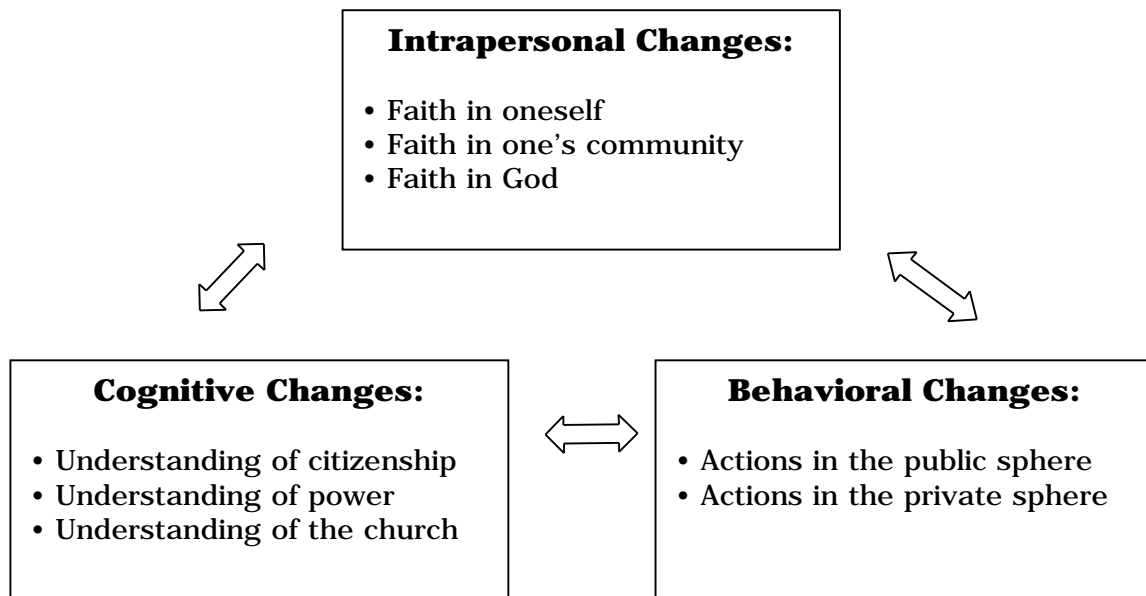
“Beyond these new homes, and infrastructure, however, the most important accomplishment of the IAF organizations is the development of nontraditional leaders in historically disenfranchised communities.”

- Ernesto Cortés , 1995

Chapter Four:

In this thesis I have argued that central to the IAF approach to building power is an investment in the development of their leaders. This investment extends beyond traditional notions of civic skills to consider the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of human growth. While the previous chapter explored the ways in which Valley Interfaith and the IAF support and foster development, this section will address the *results* of this approach. The central question I address here is not, “Do people change through their involvement?” My initial interviews in January of 2000 established beyond a doubt that individuals have indeed changed when one hundred percent of participants immediately responded affirmatively. My analysis is thus based on the premise that people have developed, and the focal question becomes: **How** have they changed through their participation in the organization? What empirical evidence can we draw on to understand the ways in which an investment in individuals leads to development?

Valley Interfaith is based on the intersection of three core elements: faith, power, and action. The stories I heard from these leaders embodied all three—faith in their ability to effect change, the power of organized people to do so, and the active steps they are taking to alter the inequities of their community. This chapter presents the findings of these narratives—the voices and testimonies of Valley Interfaith’s leaders’ perspectives on their own growth and development. The following chart illustrates and summarizes the intrapersonal, cognitive, and behavioral changes that participants demonstrated:



It would be impossible to report the full story of each of the individuals I met in these travels. And yet, I believe that the power of these voices is difficult to portray without providing a brief description of the people behind these quotations. Although my analysis primarily draws on the ten individuals with whom I conducted multiple interviews, I will provide a brief background of three individuals to whom I refer frequently in my analysis. I do so in order to represent some recurring identity characteristics of participants, as well as some of their differences.

Sara:

Sara is one of the matriarchs of the organization. Almost seventy and barely five feet tall, state representatives throughout Texas greet her by name when she makes one of her frequent trips to Austin. Unlike many of the Mexican immigrants in the Valley, who make their way north just a few hundred miles from bordering states, Sara was raised in the south of Mexico in the state of Yucatan. Her eyes quickly grow moist as she speaks of her childhood. She tells of following her parents around as they worked selling tacos. She tells of having to leave school after the second grade to help put food on the table. And she tells of the day to day struggle for survival.

Sara met and married a shrimper, and they moved to Port Isabel, Texas in 1960. Port Isabel is perched on the edge of South Padre Island, a

tourist destination for hundreds of spring breakers who come for the long stretches of white sand, the year round sunshine, and the low prices. The family settled in Port Isabel, raised seven children, and lived off the shrimp trade for decades. During these years, Sara's experience reflected the isolation of many women who immigrated from Mexico. "I didn't know anybody, I didn't know anything." Afraid to even go to church, Sara dropped off her children at mass for years before finally attending herself. This decision was perhaps the starting point of a new trajectory for Sara. Through the church, Sara was exposed to the social teachings of Catholicism. Father Joe, the priest at Our Lady Star of the Sea, was one of the first religious leaders involved in Valley Interfaith. Sara demonstrated the natural curiosity that IAF identifies as one of the key qualities of leaders. "In the religion classes they mentioned Valley Interfaith. And I asked what Valley Interfaith was. But nobody could tell me." Sara had the determination, the sense of injustice about the struggle her husband and other shrimpers were experiencing, faith in the church to bring about change. What she didn't have were the tools, the knowledge, and the sense of self to put her anger into action.

Lidia:

The first time I met with Lidia she barely spoke for the first five minutes. Her responses to my questions were brief, and she was clearly inhibited by the tape recorder and microphone that lay between us at the kitchen table. The inhibition, however, disappeared rapidly when I asked her about Valley Interfaith. Lidia began to tell stories. She told me the story of how her colonia rallied together under her leadership to demand a local school for their children. She told me stories of sleeping in the barn with the cows during the decades that she worked in the fields, of waitressing and driving a school bus for years for minimum wage, grateful for penny raises. And she told me stories of two Lidias: the old, quiet Lidia who would hide her head whenever attention was called to her, who thought her main responsibility was to stay home and defer to the powers that be, the old Lidia that still thinks at times that someone is going to "find her out" when she speaks up. The voice that calls "Here I am standing here telling them what to do and I'm not employed, I'm just a housewife. But they don't know how weak I am and there are so many things I don't know." She contrasted that with the new proud Lidia who spells her name clearly, L-I-D-I-A when interviewed by the local press so they'll get it right in the paper the next day. The new Lidia that points her finger angrily at the officials of the local water board when they don't deliver as promised. The new Lidia that burns at the abuse she perceives and works day after day to alter the conditions of that abuse

Jon:

At first glance, the Jon of ten years ago was a role model for residents of the Valley. Born and raised in McAllen, Jon grew up with his five

sisters and brothers following his grandfather in the fields to pick cotton. Lucky enough to have parents that always stressed the importance of education, he ignored the lack of encouragement from his high school guidance counselor and went on to college to study medical technology. Coming of age in the late sixties, Jon was greatly influenced by the farmworkers movement. He describes himself as having always been politically radical and angry at what he saw a racist and unjust economic system. After marrying and beginning the first thirteen years of family life in Corpus Christi, Jon moved back to the north side of McAllen, the area traditionally home to the Anglo and professional Hispanic residents of the city. As a member of the middle class parish, Holy Spirit, Jon became involved in Valley Interfaith about eight years ago. Earnest and sincere, Jon describes his initial impressions of Valley Interfaith with humility and humor: "Well, the first time I ever met or went to an leaders assembly at Valley Interfaith I looked around and here I was a forty year old guy surrounded by seventy, eighty year old ladies and old men. And I was going, 'What am I doing here? Why am I hanging around with these people? They don't know anything about politics. I know everything about politics. . . boy was I wrong.'" Jon's development was not about a "coming to consciousness" but a combination of political skills and spiritual grounding that will be further discussed later in this chapter. Jon's story is one of how much the "educated" have to learn, the potential for all of us to grow regardless of professional or educational status.

Intrapersonal Changes:

"They walk differently. They stand differently. They are radiant."

These are the words used by both Valley Interfaith organizers and clergy to describe the changes they have observed in the individuals that they have mentored. They refer to that inexplicable glow deeply rooted in a belief in oneself. Zimmerman explains that the intrapersonal perspective is based on how people see themselves (Zimmerman, 1995). Changing understandings and changing behaviors are predicated upon a sense of self-worth, a belief in the unseen, and faith in one's own potential. Regardless of age, regardless of gender, regardless of education, all individuals reported changes in how they see themselves as they shared discoveries of their own capacity, the capacity of their community, and the capacity of their God.

Faith in oneself—The discovery of individual capacity:

“I didn’t want to talk, I didn’t, I felt that I was nothing, without the language. . . I thought, I’m not going to be able to do anything here, I’m nothing, I’m nobody. But, (I thought) I’m going to continue, and I continued, and I continued...”

Sara

“For a lot of people there’s a real taking seriously of one’s self that happens, that people will say that their primary relationships change... they begin seeing themselves differently and they begin imagining new possibilities and that’s what the work is about, discovering themselves for the first time, discovering their capacity.”

Sister Judy Donovan

The development of self-esteem, of confidence, and of efficacy all come about as individuals participate in the relationship building, the workshops, and the actions of Valley Interfaith. In “Reweaving the Social Fabric”, Ernesto Cortés writes, “When ordinary people become engaged and shift from being political spectators to being political agents, when they begin to play large, public roles, they develop confidence in their own competence.” (1995, p.3) Moving into the organization, moving from passivity to an agent of change, involved a growth in self-esteem. Although this was not a direct question, forty-six percent of respondents in the initial interviews volunteered that they felt more self-confident as a result of their participation. This was most common in those with little formal schooling who had previously deferred to people they perceived as better educated. Lidia explained

“I really got some confidence through this organization because I never thought I could do anything. You stay home because you think, people think the city knows what they’re doing. Engineers know. Teachers know what they’re doing. We all stay home and do what we’re supposed to be doing. Because that’s what my attitude was. I really thought that was the way that it was. But no. It is not and that’s what we’re all learning through the process of this.”

For Martha, a woman who spent the majority of her life working as a migrant worker, Valley Interfaith opened the door to what she dreamed possible for herself. She laughed when I asked her if she would have

volunteered to co-chair a meeting a few years ago. *“No, . . . I guess I didn’t believe in myself the way I did now. I didn’t think that I could do anything but work in the fields, now I know that I can do whatever I can set my mind to.”*

While my research was not conducted specifically to highlight differences in the gender development of women and men, it is impossible to ignore the consistency of the theme of voice that emerged from the interviews with women. In her study of women’s development, Mary Belenky underscores the importance of this metaphor: *“When a woman said she was developing a voice, it was likely she was claiming the power of her mind and becoming more self-directed.”* (1999, p.7) Belenky describes the “silent” stage of knowing common to many women. Emerging from this silence, both literally and figuratively, is an initial step that many women identified as critical in their own development.

Valley Interfaith women leaders also consistently spoke of the growth in their confidence through the symbol of voice. In the context of political participation, the ability to express oneself verbally is clearly central. Speaking out, however, represented more than merely talking. Several of the women I spoke with explained that earlier they never would have felt comfortable talking to people they did not know, and provided the example of speaking with me. Olga, whose ability to articulate and reflect on her growth defies her descriptions of a previously “silent” self, admitted *“I never used to speak, as I’m speaking with you now, like I speak in the house meetings. It developed in me, (I heard them talking about) knowing my story, getting out your story. But I couldn’t, I couldn’t, I couldn’t...and I realized that I have begun to speak more.”* Maricela, like Olga, a monolingual Spanish speaker with little formal education, also spoke of the energy she derived from seeing the organization work. She then immediately proceeded to say that previously, she was “unclear”. *“Unclear, without any way of speaking. No, no, no. I never could have imagined speaking, or having a conversation with somebody. Even here with you, I thought, well, maybe I won’t have much to say to you.”*

While less dramatically, men also described changes in their ability and comfort level with speaking. For men, however, speaking seemed to be more directly tied to taking on public roles. Jon talked about gaining a new “political” voice: “. . . *Before I didn’t know how to talk to people. How do you talk to a senator, How do you talk to a congressman?*” Even local clergy, individuals in leadership roles already trained in public speaking, described how the organization had provided them with greater confidence in the public arena. As one religious leader explained, *“And I had no problem with doing a homily on Sunday -- several on Sunday, but to speak in Sidney Hall was a totally new experience for me. And so I grew a lot by doing these things.”*

The theme of voice was not limited to speaking in public, to speaking with strangers. Rather, emerging from silence is intimately tied here to a growing awareness of injustice, and a sense of power to battle this injustice. For both Lidia and Olga their discussion of “voice” was rooted in their critique of their socio-economic conditions, a “coming to consciousness”. Olga discussed how others see her differently now:

“They tell me: You speak more, you have other ideas, you aren’t like you were before, quieter. They used to tell you something and you accepted it.” For Olga, not speaking was not only silence, it implied acceptance of economic and racial oppression, acceptance of the conditions in which she had always lived. She immediately related the following story:

“I went to Houston with one of my sisters and I saw the injustices against the immigrants, and in a city where there are many Anglos. But they are also abusive in terms of salaries. I went to church and there was a ranch, where they work cutting down trees and they pay very little to the people that work there, they pay them minimum wage and it’s hard work. So in the church I met many of them and I asked “Why do you let them pay you so little if this work is good work?” My sister told me “Be quiet, don’t even start, be quiet.” I told her, “No, they need to come together, with the Hispanics and the Anglos, there are also Anglos working there.” She said, ‘Don’t even start.’”

The voice of Tania, another leader, also emerged as she was provided with a space to critique and act on her reality. *“Because you wake up,*

you're more alive, you're more involved in things and you understand more, you ask, you ask, you go and you look, you go and you ask for, you go and you give...this is what I mean when I say I feel more alive because it's not like it was before where it was just 'you there and me here.'" For many, this space to question is the first step to participation. Documentation of other educational strategies like The Right Question Project demonstrates that many low-income individuals do not participate because they "don't even know what questions to ask." (Right Question Project, 2000) As people who struggled economically their entire lives, Valley Interfaith not only provided Olga and Tania with a space to vocalize their questions, it provided them with a conceptual framework to understand and name these conditions as unjust. As they name, they question, and they act, Olga, Tania, and others have a greater sense of agency and a greater awareness of their socio-economic context. If "power" is the ability "to be able" these individuals possess a new sense of power as they are able to act on their own behalf. They also recognized, however, that their power is rooted in the relationships they have built in their community.

Faith in one's community: The discovery of collective capacity

". . . And one day we'll – like it is now, we'll become a tremendous political force that if anything needs to be passed in a legislature it will have to come by us. And I really believe it can happen. It's happening now."

- Jon

"What Valley Interfaith has done is to bring hope to the Valley."

- Valley Interfaith Clergy

One hundred percent. Of the twenty-five people I interviewed, twenty-five responded that they believed that when people came together they could bring about change. After the first few interviews, I was almost hesitant to ask the question, as I met with responses like Alicia's, "*Of course, little one!*" While this percentage is impressive in and of itself, it

becomes even more impressive when considered in light of the historic marginalization of the Valley. This sense of efficacy is not indigenous to the region, it has been cultivated through the deliberate teaching of power described in the previous chapter:

Political efficacy is not necessarily a component of the emergence of self. The flurry of “self-help” literature and “empowerment” groups is testimony to the thousands of individuals throughout the country that seek some form of “self-improvement”. In Valley Interfaith, personal efficacy occurs within a context of community efficacy. People demonstrate not only changes in how they see themselves as individuals, in their own confidence levels, but how they see their ability to effect change as part of an organization. Efficacy grows as individuals participate and observe the results of their participation. People believe they *can* effect change because they *are* effecting change. The concept of making a difference is not an abstract one, it’s a central and recurring part of their reality as active members of Valley Interfaith. Lidia described the process of finding other parents in her neighborhood who were concerned about the schools, “*You can’t do anything with one person, but a group of people can do it...we had to yell a lot though, they aren’t just going to give it to you.*” Another emerging leader of the organization reported how she, working with other parents, obtained a covered walkway at her children’s high school:

“I said, ‘Wow.’ I couldn’t believe it. This is what a few of us can get done. Think of how much we could do if we all worked together. And like I tell a lot of my parents here, you know, I said, O.K. maybe you might have one issue and maybe she might have another one and I have something else, but if we work all together and focus on one of them and get that finished and then maybe focus on the next one, you know and take it like that. Because if one of us is going to pull in a different direction, we’re not going to accomplish anything. But if we all work together, it can be done. Because we’ve seen it. We’ve seen that it can be done.”

Time after time, people expressed absolute faith when I asked them why they believed they could bring about change. “Look at the proof,” they told me. Individuals like Tania, who had never been involved politically in

any way exclaimed, *“Well, we’ve had the changes, we’ve seen the changes in our city, in the Valley. Because, we’ve seen true changes, there’s proof, there’s proof of it.”* This “proof” becomes motivational, confirmation of the potential for the organization to grow and become more powerful.

The sense of efficacy for participants transcended lines of class or education. Just as individuals used the metaphor of voice for critiquing society, many spoke of being “woken up” through the accomplishments of the organization. While individuals with more education may have been comfortable speaking in public previously or attending a public hearing, they did not necessarily believe in the power of collective action. Valley Interfaith teaches its members that power comes in two forms: organized money and organized people. For Manuel, a social worker who had been active in his church for years, this concept was a revelation:

“We don’t have the power of money, we definitely don’t have it, but we can create another type of power, the power of organized people. I believe that yes, I think that the people united can be even more powerful than organized money. I have seen it in the conventions, when we go and we see there, five, six thousand people. I’m astonished, completely astonished. It’s something in me that is waking up, it shakes me up and gives me strength. Its awakens my energy.”

Maricela used strikingly similar language to describe her “awakening”:

“Anything is possible when the people are organized. . . I have seen it, when we’ve been in the conferences or when we’ve gone and we’ve seen five thousand, seven thousand people from Valley Interfaith. And I’m astonished. Sincerely astonished. It’s something that awakens in me. It awakens me more and makes me stronger, It awakens my energy, it gives me strength, . . . it fills me and it makes me believe and gives me energy.”

How far does this sense of efficacy reach? In my initial interviews I simply asked individuals if they believed that people could bring about change through working together. In subsequent conversations, I expanded on this to ask if change could extend beyond the reach of the Rio Grande Valley to influence state and national politics. The answers remained

positive. Many people cited the funds they have received for the *colonias*, and the Alliance School effort as evidence for potential to influence the political process on a larger scale. They see this as the outcome of collaboration with other IAF organizations in Texas. Others state how the potential for change is limitless. Alicia, for example, shook her fist at me saying, *“If we were to unite as Christians, as voters, we could change the entire system. I promise you.”*

Having born witness to the numerous visible changes in the Valley partially accounts for such consistent belief in the organization’s capacity. While belief in the visible, the seen, is critical, what is just as critical is Valley Interfaith’s leaders’ belief in the invisible, the unseen.

Faith in the unseen:

The discovery of religion as a call to social action

“For me, God manifests himself through Valley Interfaith and that is why I believe more, I am more sure of God. I feel strong because I know that through this organization, God manifests himself to do great things for the poorest of the poor.”

Alicia

For the leaders of Valley Interfaith, the development of citizenship is inextricably connected to the development of faith. As spiritual leaders of the organization, both priests speak with passion of the development they’ve observed in their parishioners. One Father describes this process: *“Your basic leaders will transform, Your primary leaders will. And for many, for many leaders this has become a way back into church”* For another clergy member, acting on one’s responsibilities as a Catholic is one and the same as acting on one’s responsibilities as a citizen. His mentorship, therefore, is one that fosters a faith that not only acknowledges, but is rooted in a community context. He explains:

“The development of a person is really a spiritual event. As a person discovers their own dignity, their worth. . . that is discovering who they are as children of God. . . So that anything

that enriches that is part of coming to develop ourselves. The more spiritual you are, basically the more human you are. The more compassionate you are. The more that you feel for other people. The more that you embrace other people. That is, for me, a consequence of faith.”

Valley Interfaith has not brought about a conversion to Catholicism. The Valley has always been a deeply Catholic part of the country. Rather, through their participation in Valley Interfaith, individuals explain that their connection to, and understanding of God has changed. While these changes manifested themselves differently across gender, across education, and across socio-economic level, all individuals spoke of the different role that faith now plays in their life.

For those that struggle financially, especially monolingual women, their faith has taken on a new meaning to them as they came to understand the Bible and the word of God as a call to social justice. For these women, their new faith in God is embedded in faith in themselves and faith in the potential for change. Olga explained, *“If before I had faith, now I have more faith. Because you spend your life saying “Señor, señor, help me,” but nobody does anything to help themselves, so you don’t get anywhere. But that’s where your faith comes in and God says ‘help yourself, so I can help you.’”* Another woman was able to articulate the difference between her faith before and after her involvement in the organization. The following is just one small excerpt from a larger conversation we had on her faith development.

Tania *Now I have faith that everything is going to change. I have faith that we can accomplish our goals. . . we can’t get unmotivated, no. We need patience to accomplish what we’re doing because we’ve already accomplished many things.*

Interviewer: *And your faith before, what was it like?*

Tania: *Well, my faith before was a weak faith, very conformist faith. Before one had a faith that was the kind of faith you always had, in God, in the Virgin, but always wanting things to come to us, not going out to look for them and that’s what you need to do. It’s not just because you have faith or because you are very Catholic or very Christian that you can sit down and*

wait for things to come to you, you need to look for them, you have to do your part.

Interviewer: *So now your faith isn't just in God...?*

Tania: *It's in oneself, in oneself. It's in the people ourselves, we can't just say that God is always with us, we have to do something ourselves, we need to work, we need to act . . .*

Not only does Tania's story represent a deeper faith, it is also critical in that it suggests her taking on greater ownership in creating her reality. God is no longer solely responsible for what happens to Tania, she herself has a role to play.

For many of the middle-class individuals, particularly for men, it is the development of their spiritual life that has motivated their commitment to and interest in Valley Interfaith. Jon, for example, spoke in both interviews about the new sense of meaning in his life through his involvement. He explained that before, *"I don't think I really had any convictions in my life,"* and proceeded to discuss his new religious identity: *"I realized there's more to life than just coming to church on Sundays. There's more to my spirituality. And so it helped me find my prayer life, so now I can sit down and whenever I have a problem I can always turn to God and help me through the crises."* Manuel also spoke of how his friends might talk about him differently, *"I think I'm a more peaceful person at some level...so I think what people would see is maybe less frustration or more peace. More centered. Spiritually centered, and pretty content."* Many of the issues Valley Interfaith has taken on, living wages, *colonias*, do not affect Jon or Manuel directly. It is a new commitment to and understanding of Catholicism that calls upon them to act on their beliefs. In doing so, they experience a new spiritual fulfillment. This spiritual aspect, therefore, becomes critical in understanding how and why middle class and individuals with more formal education can grow through their involvement in community development efforts.

Faith in God, faith in community, and faith in oneself all develop in tandem as individuals experience dramatic interpersonal growth. While the specific nature of the development varies greatly according to the

individual's point of departure, what was consistent throughout the narratives was *development itself* as a phenomenon. When we turn to questions of cognitive development, however, we will see greater consistency in the ways that individuals grow in terms of their understanding of citizenship, power, politics, and the church.

Cognitive changes:

Valley Interfaith is an organization dedicated to teaching the principals of power and politics. The new sense of personal power described above occurs as individuals cast aside their old conceptions of power, and are provided with a new framework for understanding their role as citizens. This section will trace the cognitive changes that correspond to the intrapersonal changes described in the previous section. I will explore how people's belief in themselves mirrors a new understanding of their role as citizens, how people's belief in their organization's potential reflects a changed conception of power and politics, and how their spiritual growth emerges from a new understanding of the church as a vehicle for social justice.

Citizenship and ownership - moving to the front row:

"At the very, very beginning, my very first meeting going to Austin for the water board meeting . . . I wanted to sit in the very back. And then the organizer said, 'Sit in the front' And I said, 'No, no. That's where the mayor and the city manager sit.' I thought that they sit in the front...we would sit in the back... And she said, 'No you sit in the front because you are the one that are the taxpayers and you are the ones that are paying for their salary.' I was so embarrassed. . . I said, ' I feel so guilty seeing them sitting behind me. ' But now it is very different. We go there and we sit in the front. And we cross our legs, I get a paper and pencil and I don't know how to write, but they don't know I don't know, and I write. I'm using my poor spelling, I spell it out so that I understand it. . . I carry my things and I lift my face. I lift my head. You people are gong to have to respect people. Before it was just like, humbling yourself. But it's not that way anymore and it doesn't have to be that way."

- Lidia

In choosing to tell me this story, Lidia understood that one of the most critical changes that occurred within her was a new understanding of her role as a citizen. The civic skills of speaking, of advocating, of organizing, are predicated on this notion that in a democracy, public representatives in fact work for the citizens.

One of the most consistent themes throughout the interviews was the concept of accountability; in the first round of interviews, fifteen out of twenty five individuals brought up the topic without prompting. Therefore, on the follow-up conversations, I directly questioned people about citizenship. They repeatedly explained that their lack of knowing “how” to talk to public officials only accounted for part of their lack of participation. Even before knowing how to speak, individuals had to understand that they had a right to speak. Jon encapsulates this change in understanding.

“My understanding also has changed because being a citizen is more than just sitting at home and watching the elections It’s more than just sitting at home and reading the newspaper... It’s actually going out there and making your voice heard and being involved in the process”

He like others, proceed to expand on what he perceived as his responsibilities as a citizen:

“We need to bring them more accountable of what they do. And, you know, some of my friends say, ‘Well they’re already elected. To go ahead and do their job.’ I said, “It doesn’t work that way.” You have to present your needs. Otherwise they’re not going to go out there, go visit your area and ask you what is it that affecting you. We’ve got to bring them. We’ve got to talk to them. We’ve got to be in relationship with them. You know, let them know what’s going on.”

This new sense of entitlement was revolutionary for many, regardless of their self-esteem or leadership capacities prior to involvement with Valley Interfaith. For those individuals, like Alicia, who had been taking on leadership roles their entire lives, this was the most critical change. Unlike many of the other women, Alicia was quite explicit about never having been afraid of politicians. Yet, like the others, she felt that in some way, they

were “above her”. Alicia’s arms gesticulated strongly as she paused for emphasis and told me of the change within her.

“For example, I didn’t know. I used to speak with all of the politicians. I was tremendous. . . however, I used to think that politics was about the politician coming and how was I supposed to treat him, he’s a politician. But not anymore. I understood with Valley Interfaith that the politician is my servant and I am his boss. See the difference?”

Accountability is only an initial step for active citizenship. For many, seeing themselves as agents of change brings about a sense of outrage at a historically exploitative system and a responsibility to act on that outrage. After explaining how it is her role to keep tabs on her elected officials, Lidia grew angry. She said, *“I feel that I was abused because if there is a law saying that children must go to school, there must have been one back then.”* For Lidia, understanding that public officials in fact work for her has evoked anger at their neglect and irresponsibility. For Olga, citizenship also involves a set of responsibilities she hadn’t considered earlier. *“A Good citizen is “What does my city need? What do I need? How can my city improve? How can I participate in this process?”* Participants are aware of their own position as citizens. They have the ability to name themselves as actors, to articulate their roles as different from but related to the roles of politicians. Their doing so supports a developmental shift whereby adults take on increasing responsibility for their realities; as citizens, as Catholics, individuals externalize less blame, and possess a new sense of agency.

Understanding of power and politics:

“Because to me politics was dirty politicians who have pachangas¹ and buy you tamales and all in the hope of getting that vote. And so I wanted to be as far away from power and as far away from politics. My philosophy at that time was, what does it matter? They’re all dirty.. . . So what I realized that I had the wrong definition for politics. That politics really meant the will

¹ The word *pachanga* means party. Politicians in the Rio Grande Valley have historically thrown *pachangas* as a way to gain votes.

of the people.

- Manuel

A new understanding of one's role as a citizen comes about as individuals alter their perceptions of their political and economic context. In the initial interviews, all individuals but one reported that they understood politics differently as a result of their participation. Through its organizing, Valley Interfaith not only provides individuals with a space to critique their reality, it presents a vision of a political and economic system based on equity and justice. The IAF teaches the difference between "The world as it is" and "The world as it should be". Individuals, when provided with this framework, come to understand the tension between these worlds, and the need to build power in order to close the gap between the two.

As Tania developed a sense of responsibility as a citizen and Catholic, she understood and considered the community in which she lived differently. She explained

"Well, it's important to know, what they're (the politicians) are doing for you, what you can do for yourself, for your city. I didn't know how to relate to people, I didn't even know the names of the people that spend our money or why you paid money for taxes. . . I was very ignorant of everything. I think it's the responsibility of all of us because the government is us. I think that we are the ones that have to educate ourselves and come together as a strong voice so they listen to us. And so they send us funds. . . like for education, for training, so that people can educate themselves, so that students don't have to leave the Valley. They can earn the same here as they do there."

Understanding the political system and understanding the economic system go hand in hand as Valley Interfaith has struggled to change the culture of low wages in the region. As individuals learn how the economy functions, they also learn about the political power required to raise wages. Participants repeatedly explained that low wage workers were paid so little because they had no political clout to influence their conditions. Sara, for example, critiqued the exploitative nature of the tourist industry on South Padre Island, *"Because the owners of the businesses aren't here, like the*

hotels for example, the owners are in other states. Here it is just the administration, they (the managers) earn a good salary and they pay them (the workers) whatever they feel like. And the major industry here is shrimping, which is getting ruined because these people aren't prepared for the changes in technology... If people don't fight for themselves, nobody is going to do it." Sara and others are not only able to explain how the economy of the Valley functions, they can articulate the changes in their own perceptions of their socioeconomic context. For Olga, learning to critique the economy came about as she ceased to take for granted the conditions in which she lived, as she developed a voice as discussed in the previous section:

Olga: Because if that industry would pay more to its workers, it would benefit the economy. Those workers would buy a better car, improve their house, they'd live better economically and with less stress to support their family. They wouldn't depend on food stamps and would get off of these programs (welfare).

Interviewer: And before, did you see the economy like that?

Olga: No

Interviewer: How did you see it?

Olga: Well, you have to work so they pay you—case closed. You might have to work two jobs so that you can support your family.

Individuals therefore not only learn to understand their context and the role they play in that context, they have developed the metacognitive awareness to understand their shift in thinking. One of the key facilitators of this shift in thinking, for the majority of individuals, is the Catholic church.

Understanding of the Church:

"For me the Bible without action was....there was something missing for me. When this priest came with all of his energy to listen to our needs, then we put the bible into practice with action and it's something we're proud of. We're very proud."

- Olga

For the leaders of Valley Interfaith, a critical factor in developing a new understanding of their political context was an introduction to the church as an agent for change. Residents of the Rio Grande Valley, like residents throughout the United States, have historically understood the church and state to be necessarily separate entities. Through the patience and dedication of local religious clergy, leaders like Tania are now able to reflect upon that reality, *“Before it was like they taught you, it was that you shouldn’t mix up politics and religion with the church, but that’s how it always was.”* Eva, a devoutly religious Catholic, also described the shift in her understanding

“For me the church was those people that visited the sick, those people that were present at a funeral to offer support, to bring messages of love and caring and hope for healing. Those people that worried about the families that were suffering. . . for me this was religion. Valley Interfaith for me was politics, it was something that didn’t interest me. But I came to mature and to understand it.”

The religious leaders involved in Valley Interfaith introduced a new approach to reading the Bible and understanding the word of God to the Valley. They presented Jesus Christ as a political actor, one who called upon Christians not only to pray, but to act. Manuel, who had been a regular churchgoer for years, had an initial resistance to the church becoming involved in politics. Yet, his interest and revised definition for power came about as he participated in Valley Interfaith activities. *“. . . Another key realization is that being a Catholic, what I learned was that Jesus Christ was a political figure. And that’s a major shift for me. . . . And so Jesus wanted to come and show us a different way of living and being and relating to each other.”*

As individuals cast aside their old beliefs about the separation of church from politics, they came to interpret the word of God as a call to action. Thus, as their beliefs and faith in God are strengthened, they understand their responsibilities to act on these beliefs differently. Olga explained that this new interpretation resonated with her:

“Because sometimes God speaks to us about these injustices and we do nothing but listen in the church, we leave church, and it stops there. But if we listen to how the Bible speaks about poverty, about injustice, about how God tells us to do something for our brother, and then we walk out of the church and leave it there, we aren’t doing anything. Before the activities of the church were limited to celebrating Christmas, Easter, CCD class, but it stopped there. . . but now we have Christmas, we have el Via Cruces, we have CCD, but they are focused in activities of the community. For example, in the celebration of the Virgen of Guadalupe, they say that she appeared before an indigenous man, before an indigenous man who wasn’t educated but with desire to struggle. And many of us are not educated, we come from other countries, but we also are motivated to struggle, to improve ourselves, to make people listen so that we won’t live oppressed like those indigenous people. We can be something great if we have the chance.”

Reading the Bible through a socio-political lens connects the spiritual and often abstract world to the immediate needs and pressures of one’s day to day existence. This understanding not only made sense to people, understanding God differently led to the deeper spiritual connection as described above. For Amanda, this understanding was critical: *“Especially when we have the trainings with Valley Interfaith, that’s where really I understand more about the Bible because they give examples of what we do and what God wants us to do. So that kind of changed...I would go to church and I don’t know—I wouldn’t see really what God was trying to give with the message until I got involved with Valley Interfaith.”* For Amanda, for Olga, for Manuel, prayer decontextualized from action was less fulfilling, less meaningful, and less potent than a Catholicism that called for a different belief system, a different way of understanding, and a different set of behaviors.

Behavioral Changes: Taking Action

Interviewer: What have you participated in that you didn’t participate before?

Olga: What haven’t I participated in?

“And ultimately we believe that change doesn’t happen until you act on it. Insight never liberated anybody.”

- Sister Judy Donovan

A heightened sense of efficacy. The ability to critique the socio-economic conditions of the Valley. Increased self-confidence. A deeper relationship with God. These changes, while profound, do not in and of themselves lead to better jobs, to safer neighborhoods, to health insurance. Active citizens must believe in their potential to effect change. They must understand how to bring about change. But they must also act on these beliefs and understandings. In what ways do these people now participate in their community that they did not do previously? From testifying in front of thousands to organizing voter registration campaigns, from countless hours of local planning sessions to waking up at three a.m. to be in Austin for the nine o’clock rally. Individuals throughout the Valley are participating politically in ways they never dreamed possible.

Through their participation in the organization, people feel a sense of belonging to a whole, a sense of belonging that generates action. It is critical to note here that this participation is in fact a change. With very few exceptions, the individuals I spoke with were not politically active prior to their involvement. Martha, for example explained, *“I didn’t vote, I didn’t participate in anything that doesn’t concern me. . . Now I vote, something I should have done a long time ago, I get involved, in the school board.”* The following year, I spoke with Martha again just days after she spoke publicly at a local action and she added, *“I feel that I have become a stronger person because I can go out and do things that before I never would have even dreamt about.”*

Sara also emotionally related how the confidence she gained through the organization has led to her serving as a representative on several boards, leading public actions in Austin, and chairing multiple meetings.

“It’s educated me. For me the organization has been a small university. I’m not afraid anymore, I’m not embarrassed. Even in my home, with my husband...now I feel that I am not afraid, that I’m not ashamed, I can make an appointment with anybody, I can speak to them .”

While these interviews did not directly probe into changes in actions in the private sphere, Sara was one of many who mentioned different behaviors in the home. Olga explained that as a result of her influence, her husband finally decided to become a citizen after decades of being eligible. Manuel, one of Valley Interfaith's most active leaders, also attributes his involvement in the organization to his wife's enthusiasm. Thus, despite the IAF tradition of drawing a firm line between the personal and the political, in practice the development of an individual's voice and mind does not remain in any one sphere.² Increased engagement in public life manifests itself in multiple venues. From defending oneself in Austin to defending oneself in the kitchen, from speaking out to marching, everyone I spoke with is involved in multiple actions that represent a dramatic increase in participation. The majority actively work to further engage their friends and neighbors in their work. Tania talked of bringing information to the people she knows: *"We carry the word, we teach what they talk about, what is going to happen, what we know to the people that don't know and don't participate."*

The link between individual and community development is reinforced as individuals understand that when they participate in new forms of public action, they are not doing so as individuals. Rather, they are doing so as members of an organization. Sara articulated this connection between personal and community efficacy and action:

"I used to say—who am I to go and ask for money? Or to go and ask something of someone? I say, well, I have the backing of my church, I have the organization, it's not me. And that's what gives me strength and I do it. I don't feel alone, I know that something is backing me up."

Action, therefore, while carried out by individuals, occurs within an institutional context that provides a sense of courage and power.

² Greater investigation of the manifestation of these changes in the private sphere could serve as a basis for further inquiry.

“What Valley Interfaith does to bring about these changes is actually - let you discover yourself.”

- Jon

The stories of Valley Interfaith suggest infinite potential for growth as individuals begin “to discover themselves”. The changes that the people of Valley Interfaith have undergone are as diverse as the individuals involved. For Sara, it meant developing an ego, a confidence in herself. For Alicia, it meant the skills, a renewed understanding of power and politics. For Jon it was about a new sense of meaning. For Olga it involved a transformation in the way she understood the call of the church. Each individual demonstrated change in the areas of beliefs, understandings, and actions. For all, these categories were mutually dependent and reinforcing. People’s faith grows because they understand the church differently. Their belief in themselves grows in the context of community. Their faith in their community grows as they witness their own actions and the actions of others.

The sum of these elements suggests something stronger than change, something more powerful than development. Listening to these stories and analyzing these narratives compel us to consider that what is actually occurring as individuals participate in Valley Interfaith is a transformation. According to Robert Kegan, transformation is not only “filling the container with new information”, but involves, “a shift in the container itself”. (Kegan, 1994) Individuals, therefore, are not only learning the names of local politicians or the intricacies of the Texas legislature, they are developing a new way of making sense of their worlds. In the concluding chapter I will explore how this transformation in individuals’ self-concept, in efficacy, and in action can play a critical role in community development efforts to achieve social, political, and economic change.