

Common Ground's Brand of Social Justice Accessible to All

I attended my first Common Ground event on April 1, 2015, at City Hall, Milwaukee. It was a press conference specific to Mayor Barrett's meeting with Nationstar Mortgage, scheduled for later that day. The specific issue to be discussed involved the Sherman Park area of the city, where Nationstar's foreclosures have caused urban blight. The Common Ground initiative, Milwaukee Rising, has an ongoing campaign in the area, and this press conference announced some of their concerns for the way Nationstar is handling the foreclosures and the negative effect on the Sherman Park region. Common Ground representatives presented their case cogently, with strong speakers and articulate witnesses. I was familiar with Common Ground through their involvement at my church, and I knew they were dynamic, but this meeting was indeed very powerful and I was proud to be participating, even if just sitting in the audience applauding my agreement.

Jennifer O'Hear from Common Ground

One of the speakers at the press conference was Jennifer O'Hear. She said the following, which was Common Ground's stance on their Web site and at the press conference:

"We are here as leaders. We brought the Nationstar problem to light and we have proposed a specific solution:

- 1) Nationstar will donate \$25 million to the City of Milwaukee Challenge Fund to foster the rehabilitation of foreclosed properties.
- 2) Nationstar will donate \$5 million over five years to fund five to ten housing counselors to go door to door to work with the 1624 families on the delinquent and underwater loans that Nationstar services. The intention would be to prevent further mortgage foreclosures.
- 3) Nationstar will assign a full-time person on the Nationstar staff to work with Milwaukee housing counselors to restructure mortgages.

"We are confident Mayor Barrett and [Council] President Murphy will ask Nationstar for something similar to our proposal. "

As you can see, Common Ground was very specific and purposeful about their requests. The demands were actionable. The press conference was covered by TV6, so the requests were publicized to a wide audience, lending some clout. And the press conference was a very effective and strategic presentation, influencing the mayor's office by its powerful and public message. It was obvious during the presentation that Common Ground did its homework. They are known for being thorough.

Jennifer went on to say: "Common Ground got involved in the foreclosure crisis several years ago because residents and churches in Sherman Park wanted to do something about crime. In researching what could be done, they discovered that foreclosed and abandoned homes were magnets for crime. Getting the banks whose lending practices caused the foreclosure crisis to put \$33.8 million toward rehabbing foreclosed properties and putting them in the hands of responsible homeowners is a concrete step toward reducing crime. "

What does it mean to participate in Common Ground? How does social justice involve us as we sit in our pews at church? This question concerned me as my church leaders became more involved with Common Ground. I was at church to worship, so I wasn't sure about the social justice connection. That seemed outside the scope of what the church offered. Or wanted it to offer. Yet Jesus was involved in

social justice. He advocated feeding and clothing the needy. He didn't want us to be passive and ignore the less fortunate. He wanted us to be bold and make a statement. There isn't so much that I can do individually to further God's work in the greater community. But there is strength in numbers, and Common Ground provides the conduit for collective and positive change.

Kathy from First Unitarian Society

I spoke with Kathy, who sat ahead of me at the press conference. I asked her how she became involved in Common Ground. Kathy attended the first big public assembly years ago, after reading an article in The Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel about the gathering. She was impressed by the premise of the group and by the size of the gathering. Bob Connolly (Common Ground Staff Director) is a neighbor of hers, and he had been instrumental in leading the organization. Kathy invited him for coffee, so she could learn more about the group. She has been involved ever since, not so much leading the organization, but participating as a loyal volunteer. She believes in Common Ground's purpose in the greater Milwaukee community. Kathy lives in the city of Milwaukee and feels that Common Ground's mission is compatible there, but thinks that the purpose of the group would be compatible anywhere else as well.

Kathy commented about the organizational skills of the group. She appreciates that they are thoughtful, deliberate and consistent in their approach, not scattered or knee-jerk. She appreciates their purposefulness, their focus.

Margie from Wauwatosa Presbyterian

Margie sat next to me. I asked her about her involvement in the Common Ground organization. Margie became interested in Common Ground after she was introduced to the group by her friend, Martha, a member of Immanuel Presbyterian Church. Margie has volunteered for the past three years; Margie and Martha are both retired. Martha invited Margie to attend one event where people were accomplishing a great deal, no spinning of wheels or pursuing projects with no conclusions. Margie was attracted to the approach Common Ground uses: assessing problems, focusing upon needs they can impact, then strategically following through on addressing those needs. Margie was also very impressed by Common Ground's record of success. Margie joined Martha in volunteering for Milwaukee Rising, one of the several issue campaigns of Common Ground. Milwaukee Rising works to restore foreclosed and vacant/abandoned properties in Sherman Park. Margie and Martha troubleshoot problems with vacant properties, reporting anything that makes the property look derelict or abandoned. They also talk with neighbors of the vacant properties, establishing constructive relationships in the neighborhood. They volunteer to help with open houses to market the rehabbed houses, and attend meetings with other members of Common Ground to show public support for issues related to the neighborhood. Margie likes the efficiency and purposefulness of Common Ground. The group researches and pursues projects that could be completed successfully. Margie likes the success rate of the group. Her time isn't wasted.

Want to get involved? Want your church to get involved? For more general information about Common Ground, please visit their website: <http://www.commongroundwi.org/>. For more specific information, please call 414.751.0755, or email info@commongroundwi.org.