

# People, Not Polar Bears

*Faith in Place's First Ten Years*

“It’s about people, not polar bears,” Faith in Place spokespeople pronounced as part of their standard talk on developing environmental ministries. “By all means, love nature, take your kids outside, and make interaction with the natural world part of your spiritual life. But when it comes to environmental issues in church, talk about people and where people live.”<sup>1</sup> While popular associations with environmentalism might evoke images of backpackers hiking the Sierra Nevada, Greenpeace activists defending whales, or Al Gore warning about melting polar bear habitats, Faith in Place leaders wanted to convey that their work was about something else: the human faces of environmental disasters and the growing challenges that regular people confront, day to day, as a result of environmental degradation.

Although Faith in Place leaders shared other environmental organizations’ concerns about natural places, endangered species, and climate change trends, Faith in Place looked fundamentally different in its coalition, activities, and priorities. Each year when several Chicago environmental organizations traveled to the state capitol for Environmental Lobby Day, Faith in Place’s was the only coalition that included a Zoroastrian and several African Americans. Whereas other nonprofit organizations’ donor events involved gourmet food and bountiful wine, Faith in Place raised funds over a spread of fried chicken and homemade pie. And while the Sierra Club’s mission statement talked about protecting wild places, using resources responsibly, and restoring the quality of the

natural environment, Faith in Place's mission statement focused on love, care, and faith.<sup>2</sup>

Like many other participants and observers of Faith in Place, I was initially absorbed by the organization's distinctive approach. Shortly after I began my fieldwork, Faith in Place received a *Chicago Magazine* "green award." The accompanying magazine article included a full-page color photograph of Faith in Place's executive director and the coordinator for Muslim outreach, who was wearing a black hijab that revealed only her hands and face. The story began by contrasting Faith in Place's "small and fair" Unitarian Universalist director with its "tall and dark" Muslim outreach coordinator before describing how the women overcame their seeming differences.<sup>3</sup> The article and photograph, like much of Faith in Place's own promotional material highlighting its ability to unite diverse communities through environmental involvement, signaled Faith in Place's distinctive approach and priorities. As my time at Faith in Place progressed I never saw reason to doubt the sincerity of their message, yet I did come to understand how these dichotomies played into constructions of fantasy and desire among Faith in Place participants and supporters.

In this chapter I describe Faith in Place's origins and development within the context of the American environmental movement and with attention to strategic decisions its leaders made to help their organization survive and ultimately flourish. Although Faith in Place originated with priorities, activities, and participants that were quite similar to those of numerous other environmental groups, its first ten years involved a series of strategic decisions in which leaders developed measures to differentiate their work from mainstream environmentalism. The environmental movement historically has been associated with the interests of white elites, and despite the best efforts of white environmental leaders most mainstream organizations have had difficulty attracting minority audiences.<sup>4</sup> Faith in Place became much more successful in that endeavor in part because it rejected its own place within the history of American environmentalism. Instead it positioned itself as an authoritative leader within a new movement, *religious* environmentalism, which offered its own set of priorities and concerns. Placing itself outside the community of mainstream environmentalists and inside the broad community of "people of faith," Faith in Place was able to attract minority communities who previously had discounted the environmental movement.

## IN THE BEGINNING . . .

“In 1999 a light bulb (compact fluorescent, of course) goes off in Steve Perkins’ head and Faith in Place is launched to create a welcoming landscape for dialogue and action on environmental sustainability.”<sup>5</sup> So goes the origin story of Faith in Place as recorded in the organization’s ten-year report. As this story suggests, Faith in Place began with the vision of Steve Perkins, vice president of a Chicago environmental nonprofit, the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT). Having worked at CNT for nearly two decades, Perkins was struck by the overwhelming absence of religious communities from environmental efforts in Chicago, and he sought to redress that problem at CNT. He organized an advisory group of theologians, religious leaders, and activists to help develop the idea. In 1998 the group published a statement, “One Creation, One People, One Place,” intended to initiate conversations about the environment among religious communities across the region.<sup>6</sup> After declaring the unity of the Chicago religious community despite differences in languages and styles of prayer (the “one people” who shared the “one place”), the statement called on congregations to “act as responsible citizens of Creation.” To implement that vision, the group advised CNT to develop an “Interreligious Sustainability Project” (ISP) where participants could reflect and take action on the religious mandate to protect creation. Perkins established an “interreligious sustainability circle” that drew members from congregations in the affluent suburb of Evanston in 1999, and CNT obtained foundational support to hire Rev. Clare Butterfield, a Unitarian Universalist minister who had interned for CNT as a seminary student, to lead the project full time. Under Butterfield’s leadership the ISP established sustainability circles in six other regions across Chicagoland over the next year.<sup>7</sup>

With varying levels of involvement the groups engaged in interfaith reflection on environmental teachings and initiated local environmental projects. Although CNT staff chaired the circles’ monthly meetings, each group had significant leeway for determining its structure, activities, and programming. Activities ranged from developing sustainable food initiatives and an urban agricultural program for neighborhood youth, to engaging in local political organizing for improved public transit and helping the city invest in energy-efficient streetlights. ISP leaders intended to cultivate religious diversity by creating interfaith circles, but in practice the groups were mostly Protestant with a mix of liberal Jews and

Catholics. A 2003 evaluation report notes the membership of a single Sikh and a single Zoroastrian in one of the suburban circles. Like most other environmental organizations the circles drew participants who were almost entirely white, affluent, and highly educated.<sup>8</sup>

The ISP began to change its focus in 2002. First, Butterfield changed the organization's name to Faith in Place because she thought the previous name "was just nasty from a marketing perspective" and did not adequately convey the organization's focus.<sup>9</sup> Second, she initiated two regional projects independent from the sustainability circles as a way to cultivate increased participation and support. This shift marked the beginnings of Faith in Place's transition away from CNT. The first regional project, Twenty Percent for Creation, promoted alternative energy by encouraging congregations to purchase wind power and contribute to building the necessary infrastructure in the region. The second, Taqwa Eco-Halal, provided a source of sustainable meat slaughtered according to Muslim dietary requirements. Shireen Pishdadi joined the staff to oversee that project and recruit Muslim communities to Faith in Place.

With its expanding staff and programming, Faith in Place was experiencing growing pains as it struggled to compete for funding with other CNT projects. In 2003 the project's leadership determined it would be best for Faith in Place to separate from CNT, and the following year Faith in Place incorporated as an independent nonprofit. With the addition of a development director, a youth program coordinator, and its own office suite inside a church on Chicago's northwest side, Faith in Place began to move away from its work with the sustainability circles to focus more on regional projects and direct interaction with congregations.

#### RACE, CLASS, AND AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTALISM

As Faith in Place expanded its outreach efforts, its leaders began developing measures to address a challenge confronting the environmental movement: attracting minority participants. Scholars and activists alike have long noted the absence of people of color in the environmental movement and have offered several explanations to account for minority communities' seeming lack of environmental concern.<sup>10</sup> A dominant explanation in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that poor minority populations were too overwhelmed with the pressing concerns of daily life to consider less urgent problems such as the long-term health of the envi-

ronment.<sup>11</sup> While this theory remains influential in popular understandings of the gap between the environmental concerns of whites and minorities, more recent scholarly explanations have shifted to emphasizing the social locations of those empowered to define what constitutes an environmental problem. Revisionist accounts of environmental history contend that environmental concern transcends lines of race and class once we expand the definition of environmentalism. Both Robert Gottlieb and Carolyn Merchant offer comprehensive environmental histories along that model, integrating urban, public health, and industrial themes as well as examples of minority populations' interactions with the environment through subsistence farming and slavery. Both point out that poor and working-class urban populations engaged in environmental activism throughout the twentieth century but that their efforts have not historically been considered "environmental."<sup>12</sup> Scholars have also noted that the Congressional Black Caucus has a strong environmental voting record and that minority groups were central to the passage of clean air and water legislation.<sup>13</sup> But mainstream environmental organizations fail to attract minority involvement, these studies suggest, because of their wilderness-focused agendas and overwhelmingly white leadership, membership, and image.

Despite a growing body of literature suggesting an expansive understanding of environmental history that includes working-class, industrial struggles, American environmentalism in the popular imagination continues to be associated with a legacy of white, middle-class efforts to protect nature for white middle-class enjoyment.<sup>14</sup> The modern environmental movement developed from Progressive Era conservation efforts of powerful figures such as President Theodore Roosevelt, forester Gifford Pinchot, and Sierra Club founder John Muir. As a precursor to modern environmentalism, conservationism entailed efforts to use natural resources wisely. The Sierra Club, the prototypical conservationist group, was founded in 1892 under the leadership of educated, affluent men.<sup>15</sup> Understanding themselves as "moral defenders of the great outdoors," Progressive Era conservationists promoted outdoor experiences such as hiking and camping that were oriented to the upper class. Ancillary to its primary focus on experiencing the outdoors, the Sierra Club also supported efforts to protect wild spaces from the encroachment of civilization through the establishment of national parks. Until the 1950s, conservationism focused almost exclusively on protecting wild areas.

Environmental historian Hal Rothman marks the 1950s battle over Echo Park Dam as a decisive turning point in which conservationism

was transformed into the modern environmental movement.<sup>16</sup> Seeking to address growing water needs in the aftermath of World War II, the Bureau of Reclamation proposed the Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP), a chain of dams that would allocate water to support growth in several western states. One particular dam, to be sited at Echo Park in a remote corner of Utah and Colorado, caused widespread controversy because it would submerge Dinosaur National Monument. Through intense lobbying efforts and publicity campaigns—which included direct-mail pamphlets, news features, and even a motion picture—the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society convinced Congress to eliminate the Echo Park Dam from the CRSP. In the process, they developed methods for a new, politically aggressive form of environmentalism and expanded their constituencies beyond their narrow, elite base. The new constituency's concerns, however, remained narrowly focused on wilderness issues and failed to address pollution, sprawl, or other emerging issues that increasingly affected urban communities.

The growing constituency coalesced after the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. Ringing alarm bells about the effects of pesticides on human and wildlife populations, *Silent Spring* raised public awareness about the dangers of chemical pollution and contamination and led to major growth for the membership rolls of reform-focused environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, and the Wilderness Society.<sup>17</sup> Expanded resources helped national organizations persuade government officials to protect the environment and resulted in numerous federal regulations and protections for water quality, scenic rivers, and clean air.<sup>18</sup> Members of the Nixon administration organized the first Earth Day in 1970 to help solidify growing environmental awareness among Americans, and extensive media coverage of that event helped define an emerging environmental movement focused on issues of population growth, pollution, wilderness loss, and the use of pesticides.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s three distinct branches of environmentalism emerged. First were the centrist national organizations such as the Natural Resources Defense Council, the National Wildlife Federation, the National Audubon Society, and the Sierra Club, who largely defined environmentalism in this time period. These organizations worked on large-scale efforts to bring about reform on national and international issues through legislative and judicial actions. Second, a brand of radical environmental groups such as Greenpeace and Earth First! developed from the tradition of American radicalism and advanced

an alternative vision of environmental activism defined by protest and bearing witness. Through direct action campaigns such as sailing ships in nuclear testing zones, Greenpeace attracted former members of the 1960s counterculture who disliked the moderate tactics of mainstream environmental groups. Even more radical was Earth First!, which stood for the absolute defense of nature above all else.<sup>19</sup> Drawing inspiration from Edward Abbey's 1976 novel, *The Monkeywrench Gang*, Earth First! activists interrupted construction and development projects that would destroy wilderness, using such tactics as damaging construction vehicles and occupying ancient trees.

A third branch of activism comprising grassroots efforts to protest toxics and pollution in local neighborhoods also developed in the seventies and eighties. In 1978 Lois Gibbs organized a grassroots network of housewives who successfully held the state of New York accountable for the toxic dumping in their Love Canal neighborhood. Using the expertise she gained with Love Canal, Gibbs established the Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes to help other communities confront polluting industry forces and government agencies. The antitoxics agenda became explicitly racialized with the Warren County, North Carolina, protests in 1982, when activists challenged the siting of a chemical waste landfill in their poor, predominately black county. Driven by that and other antitoxics protests in minority communities, Reverend Benjamin E. Chavis Jr., a former civil rights leader and the executive director of the United Church of Christ's (UCC) Commission for Racial Justice, sponsored a five-year national study to understand the relationship between race and toxic dumping sites. Issued in 1987, the UCC report identified widespread evidence for environmental racism, a term Chavis coined, determining that hazardous waste sites were overwhelmingly and systematically located in minority communities.<sup>20</sup> The UCC report proved influential in generating the environmental justice movement to protest the disproportionate and deliberate placing of environmental hazards in minority communities.

While grassroots and mainstream environmental groups shared concerns about toxics and pollution, differences in tactics, priorities, and images led each party to resist identifying with the other. Mainstream groups tended to focus on large-scale and policy tactics and were less interested in local issues, just as grassroots organizers tended to resist the label "environmentalist" because they did not want to be associated with mainstream efforts. Environmental justice advocates further resisted partnerships with mainstream groups because justice advocates

expressly promoted environmental protections on behalf of people whereas they believed mainstream environmental groups prioritized earth-centric concerns.

Despite a lack of cross-fertilization between these groups in the 1980s, the environmental justice movement raised issues about race and class that mainstream groups could not ignore. On the basis of a survey of environmental groups in the United States since the 1990s, Eileen McGurty claims that the environmental justice movement has “deeply impacted environmentalism in all arenas, including traditional environmental organizations, emerging environmental justice groups, and governmental agencies responsible for implementing environmental legislation.”<sup>21</sup> McGurty notes that traditional environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council administer extensive environmental justice programming and that government agencies such as the Office of Environmental Justice at the Environmental Protection Agency are attuned to the interests of minorities. Yet even into the twenty-first century environmentalism in the popular imagination has continued to be associated with protecting wilderness and advancing the interests of white elites. Even as minority communities have expressed concern for environmental causes, mainstream environmental organizations have failed to attract minorities to their membership rolls.<sup>22</sup>

#### ENVIRONMENTALISM FOR “PEOPLE OF FAITH”

In its early years Faith in Place attracted participants who were representative of the mainstream environmental movement. Highly educated, affluent, and white, most were longtime environmentalists who could just as easily be involved (and indeed were involved) with other environmental groups. Although they brought their environmental concerns to their religious communities, their involvement tended not to be religiously motivated, and they had deeply entrenched ideas about the environmental crisis and how to solve it.<sup>23</sup> As Faith in Place developed and as its leaders found their footing as an independent organization, however, they began instituting an organizational shift designed to reach a broader audience that would be more receptive to Faith in Place’s human-centered environmental approach. In the process, they established clear boundaries between Faith in Place and other environmental groups, defining Faith in Place as a new environmental community that could overcome many of the issues that plagued the old one.



The major change concerned the types of participants Faith in Place wanted to recruit. By creating sustainability circles that brought together environmental leaders from numerous congregations, Butterfield surmised, Faith in Place actually had created a support group for “environmental refugees.” Those who joined sustainability circles, she recalled during a conversation years later, were longtime environmentalists who happened to belong to religious congregations and had been trying to awaken fellow congregants to environmental issues for years. These men and women were deeply frustrated by their congregations’ lack of environmental concern, and their congregations often were frustrated by them. With polarizing personalities, they tried to convince their congregations to stop using Styrofoam coffee cups, replace old, inefficient boilers, or spend less time in their cars, but their fellow congregants just rolled their eyes.<sup>24</sup>

Concerned that the sustainability circles were functioning primarily as support groups for discouraged environmentalists, Butterfield wanted to find new participants who could advance Faith in Place’s work more effectively. Rather than trying to organize environmental initiatives through “people whom the congregation has learned not to hear,” Butterfield planned to stage what she called “a gentle coup,” removing “environmental refugees” from their positions as the spokespeople for environmental causes.<sup>25</sup> To replace them Faith in Place sought a new population: those who were “people of faith first, environmentalists second.” Instead of talking only to the small handful of any congregation’s participants who chose to show up at environmental events, Faith in Place wanted to reach entire congregations at the heart of their worship. Thus it developed a set of practices designed to “infiltrate” congregations—encouraging sermons on environmental themes, providing environmental tips in bulletin inserts, and appointing environmental representatives to congregational committees—in order to cultivate a broader culture of earth stewardship, especially among people who did not consider themselves environmentalists. By taking steps to silence those who had always spoken out on behalf of the environment, Butterfield was also silencing the legacy of mainstream environmentalism that those participants represented and creating an opportunity to change the conversation. With a fresh environmental message centering on faith and social justice, Faith in Place started to build a coalition of environmental activists from populations that other environmental groups had failed to reach.

### *Combining Nature and Social Justice*

Whereas CNT's "One Creation" report established Faith in Place's original mission in the context of standard environmental tropes, the new vision more clearly developed from Butterfield's background and aspirations, which combined environmental concern with a priority on social justice issues. Born in a central Illinois farming community in 1960, the daughter of a computer science professor who one year planted nine thousand trees on his property, Butterfield was attuned to the natural environment from early childhood. She recalled hearing her parents engage in heated debates about the potential ecological impacts of a proposed dam on a local river, and she remembered celebrating the first Earth Day in elementary school. As Butterfield recalled during an interview, "That sense that you take care of the land you live on was really ingrained in me from a very early age."<sup>26</sup>

After completing college and law school at the University of Illinois, Butterfield moved to Washington, D.C., where she began working as an attorney for the Internal Revenue Service. But something changed for her during the Reagan administration and led her down an entirely different path. As she described her call to ministry, Butterfield began volunteering at a local soup kitchen some mornings before work and was struck by the growing presence of people who had jobs and places to live but ate at the soup kitchen because they could not afford enough food. That led her to rethink her life's calling over the next decade and eventually to return to the Midwest, where she attended Meadville Lombard Theological School, a Unitarian Universalist seminary. There, Butterfield studied environmental ethics and discovered ways to connect her interest in social justice to her lifelong concern for the environment. As a course field placement she secured an internship with CNT, and when the opportunity for a full-time job arose in 1999 Butterfield immediately seized it. At CNT, and then at Faith in Place, Butterfield sought to implement her combined vision of ecological ethics and social justice. With significant leeway in her new position as executive director of a nonprofit newly independent from CNT, Butterfield was able to align the organization more clearly under her own vision.

### *Social Justice and "Light-Green" Ethics*

The language Faith in Place leaders used to describe their work shifted over time as they developed strategies to mobilize Chicago's religious pop-

ulation. In its early years, Faith in Place leaders routinely invoked nonhuman nature as they rallied support for environmental causes. In 2004 Butterfield included nonhuman animals when she introduced Faith in Place at a community-wide workshop, saying, “We all have teachings that lead us to want to live in loving relationship with our neighbors, including our neighbors the fish and the nematodes and the soil and the trees.”<sup>27</sup> A 2006 brochure started with a paragraph about social justice, but it also included a statement of concern for other parts of nature: “The way we relate to the smallest species, to the tiniest stream and to the least powerful of our human brothers and sisters will define our relationship with our world and the One who placed us here. These are serious matters of faith.”<sup>28</sup>

By 2008, however, the organization had begun advancing what Patrick Curry calls “light green” ecological ethics, valuing nature but emphasizing human concerns as the primary reasons for protecting the environment.<sup>29</sup> In their standard introductory talk on establishing environmental ministries, Faith in Place leaders included the point that religious environmentalism was “about people, not polar bears.”<sup>30</sup> In a 2009 sermon Butterfield also downplayed concern for nonhuman animals. After describing ways that global warming would likely affect Arctic animals, Butterfield said, “But for me this isn’t really about polar bears and narwhals. Frankly, where I live, down on the south side of Chicago, those are pretty hard things to argue for. At least until we stop shooting at children. But as a religious person connection is something I can and do argue for all the time. And that’s what the carbon crisis is really about.”<sup>31</sup> While recognizing that measures to mitigate climate change would benefit animals in faraway places, Butterfield focused the issue on children close to home.

This shift in language parallels the shift in Faith in Place’s organizing strategy. The years when Butterfield was talking about tiny streams and nematodes were the years when she worked among long-term, committed environmentalists. Those audiences were receptive to mid- or dark-green environmental ethics that acknowledged nature’s intrinsic worth apart from its value to humans. As Faith in Place worked to attract entire congregations rather than just a handful of “environmental refugees” from any single congregation, however, they began to advance a more moderate form of environmentalism. Whereas Butterfield might not have been able to convince entire congregations to shift their behaviors out of concern for nematodes or narwhals, social justice concerns for children on Chicago’s south side or people who lost their homes to flooding were less controversial issues that could motivate broader action.

While Faith in Place's focus on social justice may have been effective for motivating new people to join the environmental movement, it was less compelling for more seasoned environmental activists. Daishi, a white convert Zen Buddhist priest whose *sangha* participated with Faith in Place, did not think the organization went nearly far enough in its religious environmental activism. Daishi had been a dedicated social activist for decades. Just before our interview in 2010, he had organized a demonstration in downtown Chicago to protest BP after the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Daishi told me, "I know [Butterfield] has emphasized conversion of religious institutions, and I think that's good. But it's not going to address the problem. It's just not."<sup>32</sup> Daishi told me he preferred the model of 350.org, an international team of organizers founded by environmental activist Bill McKibben. McKibben's group aimed to build a global grassroots movement that would drastically reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.<sup>33</sup> As Daishi told me, "There needs to be changes in terms of society and industry. So I really do think that solving and taking care of the environment has to happen on the level of political action. . . . It's not going to happen through people having personal conversations."<sup>34</sup> While Daishi supported Faith in Place's mission, he did not believe its efforts, grounded in moderate environmental ethics, would make a significant impact.

A group of seminary students who participated in a training session at Faith in Place similarly challenged Butterfield on her assertion that religious environmentalism should focus mainly on people. Having participated in Earth Year at the Lutheran School of Theology Chicago, several of the students had already reflected on the links between the environment and their faith.<sup>35</sup> They considered Faith in Place's message overly anthropocentric and suggested that social justice concerns must be supported by care for *all* of creation because they believed concern for people would not be enough to sustain environmental activism. Nevertheless, Butterfield maintained that when they spoke on behalf of Faith in Place she wanted them to emphasize people. She explained that historically the environmental movement had been white and middle class and that focusing on social justice "makes it more relevant."<sup>36</sup>

Margaret, a professional environmental organizer who had worked with Faith in Place, explained to me that she did not mind Faith in Place's moderate environmental position because it did not really matter what motivated individuals to protect the environment. As long as people were taking measures to lighten their impact on the earth, she

said, she did not care whether they were motivated by concern for people or concern for polar bears. “People on the south side of Chicago don’t care about the polar bear. Well I don’t want them to care about the polar bear!” she said. “But I want us to do something about climate change, because if we don’t we’re dead.”<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, Faith in Place leaders’ choice of language shaped the types of participants the organization could attract. By prioritizing concern for people over endangered species in faraway places, they connected with an audience of new, “light-green” environmentalists. At the same time, long-term environmental activists did not find Faith in Place’s messages adequately transformative.

#### BECOMING MAINSTREAM

Using methods and messages that inscribed clear boundaries between Faith in Place and secular environmental groups, Faith in Place successfully created a place for itself within the environmental community. Secular environmental groups such as the Sierra Club began to recognize Faith in Place as a partner that could effectively recruit religious communities, an untapped resource, to environmental causes. With a little help from Al Gore, Faith in Place found an authoritative place for itself in religious communities as well. In 2005 Faith in Place tied its local efforts to a broader movement when it joined Interfaith Power and Light (IPL), a national organization that mobilized religious communities to fight global warming. The next year, Faith in Place participated in an IPL campaign to host screenings and discussions of *An Inconvenient Truth* at congregations across the country. That campaign became a turning point for Faith in Place, as it recruited 144 Chicago-area congregations to offer free screenings and discussions of the film. Many of those congregations had never before hosted an environmental event. The screenings and facilitated discussions, attended by more than two thousand people from religious communities in Illinois, helped convince people that global warming was an issue of social justice, and thus a matter of faith, that their congregations must address. Dozens of churches and synagogues wanted to start new green teams and build an environmental movement within their congregations, and they knew that Faith in Place was the organization to help them. Prior to *An Inconvenient Truth*, Butterfield told me, she was never sure that her organization would survive.<sup>38</sup> But after the film screenings, enthusiasm and support for Faith in Place’s mission swelled.

With a place in both Chicago's environmental community and its (progressive) religious communities, Faith in Place's influence expanded. In 2005, Faith in Place had 120 congregational partners, but that number grew to 450 by 2008.<sup>39</sup> With its growth in membership, other groups advancing environmental projects recognized Faith in Place as an important potential ally. By going to religious congregations, it had connected with a type of audience that largely had eluded the environmental community. And among those congregations, Faith in Place became a widely recognized authority on a matter that it had helped establish as central to every faith.

### *Religious Instrumentalism and Authenticity*

In its strategy of mobilizing religious communities, Faith in Place inherited a long tradition of church-based progressive activism that had begun with Saul Alinsky (1909–72), a secular Jew from Chicago who originated what now is known as community organizing. In the late 1930s, Alinsky founded the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) on the southwest side of Chicago. The organization worked along with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to support union-organizing drives and also to address other problems in the impoverished, largely immigrant community. The collaboration of Catholic Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, who recruited local pastors to support the BYNC's union drives and neighborhood organizing, was crucial to the success of the community organization. Alinsky exported his model of church-based community organizing to other states in the ensuing decades, relying on existing social institutions such as churches, block clubs, and small businesses, to provide resources and a base of followers for initiating social and political action. Although he is known for organizing within churches, Alinsky had little interest in the culture, belief systems, or values of the churches where he worked. Instead of reinterpreting religious traditions to fit his projects, he saw churches simply as resources for community-organizing efforts.<sup>40</sup>

As a group that worked with religious communities to advance progressive causes, Faith in Place seemed to offer a modern-day example of Alinsky's organizing model. However, this was a history that Faith in Place leaders actively rejected, considering their efforts to be more "authentically" based on religion. Butterfield castigated "classic religious organizing" on the model of Alinsky as a kind of "naked instrumentalism," distinguishing Faith in Place as a collection of "religious

intermediaries who can have a more authentic presence in the congregation.”<sup>41</sup> More than recruiting churchgoers to a grassroots cause, their intention was to engage communities in “the work of personal transformation.” Faith in Place routinely collaborated with other environmental groups, but its leaders were wary of aiding those who wanted only to appropriate the religious community.

As it engaged religious communities in projects to protect the earth, Faith in Place carefully framed its programming to reflect “the teachings of faith.” More than offering basic ecological arguments to people who happened to belong to religious communities, it called on participants to act as “people of faith,” encouraging them to behave in particular ways because their religions demanded it. Butterfield wanted Faith in Place to offer something more than a set of tips for congregations to become green, she wrote, because “I don’t think most people go to church or synagogue because they want to be ‘green.’ I think they go because they want to be better human beings.” Faith in Place, then, “[was] intended to reach toward them there—in that desire to conform the way that they practice their lives to the beliefs they hold most dear.”<sup>42</sup>

The distinctions between Faith in Place’s “authentic” religiosity and the “merely instrumental” interests of some secular environmental groups were central to Faith in Place’s identity. The first suggestion of Faith in Place’s “ten tips,” which formed the backbone of the basic introductory talk that Faith in Place staff members presented to congregations, was to “connect your green efforts to your faith.”<sup>43</sup> Staff members elaborated this point by saying, “We love the Sierra Club, but we’re not the Sierra Club. Changing bulbs is an act of worship. Make the translation—it’s an act of love and faith.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Butterfield suggested that religious environmentalism was different from (and more efficacious than) secular environmentalism because religion offered hope. Butterfield explained this difference in a book proposal: “In many of the secular environmental groups I have encountered since beginning this work I have found a kind of grim hopelessness—activity that is based in a desire to be right rather than any real expectation that things will change. Hopelessness is an unhealthy emotion. It does not draw healthy-minded people toward it. But in the religious community we live in the hope of God’s redemptive initiative. Despair is theologically impermissible.”<sup>45</sup> While any number of progressive and environmental groups could approach religious communities as outsiders, Faith in Place represented itself as a fellow religious voice that could speak from within religious communities. The category of “authentic religion” created a boundary between “people of faith” and

those who merely wanted to appropriate them, placing Faith in Place squarely on the side of the faithful.

#### FAITH IN PLACE AT TEN YEARS

In October 2009 Faith in Place celebrated its ten-year anniversary with a festive benefit dinner and a move to office space in Chicago's downtown. With an annual operating budget of just over \$500,000, the full-time staff included the executive director, a deputy director, a congregational outreach worker, a youth coordinator, and a member of the Lutheran Volunteer Corps (LVC) who worked on congregational outreach and administration. Faith in Place was also in the process of obtaining funding to support an additional staff member based in central Illinois to organize congregational outreach in farming communities and provide a regular presence at the state capitol. The Muslim-outreach position had been eliminated after being vacated by two different women, as Faith in Place began to shift its resources toward supporting African Americans. Faith in Place also periodically hired temporary employees to work on particular projects, and each semester had the labor of one or two seminary students completing field training at Faith in Place. A Seminarian Speakers Bureau of students trained to give Faith in Place's two introductory talks also helped with outreach efforts.

In terms of congregational partnerships Faith in Place had worked with over 550 congregations, and the coalition was growing increasingly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. Major achievements included helping the Bridgeview Mosque Foundation become the first solar mosque in the United States and initiating a clergy conversation about green jobs that included representatives from twenty-five African American congregations. Although numerically the organization was still populated primarily by liberal white Protestants, a series of intentional hiring practices and programmatic decisions helped Faith in Place appear more and more diverse.

Faith in Place carved its own unique niche in the environmental community by identifying an absence—religious communities—and developing methods that would deliver them to the environmental movement. During an interview, Megan, an organizer for Chicago's chapter of the Sierra Club, explained ways that Faith in Place offered something unique. She told me that Faith in Place's ability to engage religious communities brought an entirely new population to local efforts to address environmental problems. The Sierra Club was adept at recruiting young,



progressive men and women, Megan suggested, but “There are communities that Faith in Place can talk to that I just feel uncomfortable with, or I’m just not as well equipped to make the right arguments. . . . So I feel like we all contribute in the best ways we can towards the ultimate goal, which is really solving the climate crisis.”<sup>46</sup> Although many of Faith in Place’s participants also belonged to other environmental groups, the religious environmental group achieved its success by developing methods that differentiated its work from other environmental groups and attracted populations who would not consider participating in environmentalism through other organizations. The Sierra Club might have offered a long history of experience influencing environmental legislation, but Faith in Place offered something a secular group could not: an “authentic” religious voice that promised to speak on behalf of all religious communities.