

Guest Commentary | Rev. Vicky Elder and Rev. Jim Lapp: Founded 20 years ago, COPA renews covenant relationships

By **SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL** |

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By the Rev. Vicky Elder and the Rev. Jim Lapp

It was 1995 the last time the Pajaro River flooded this badly. Local clergy responded, organizing charitable efforts to help those affected. But when we showed up to meetings where key decisions would be made, we were dismissed and sent back to our places of worship.

We were shocked and confused. Those of us in leadership of congregations and other civic institutions know intimately about the needs of our people and we are called by our various faith traditions to work toward the common good.

So we acted. We contacted the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the nation's oldest and largest community organizing network, and asked them to help us build a broad-based, multi-issue organization with the power to impact local decisions.

The result of this partnership is COPA: Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action. Founded in 2003, COPA represents 25 member institutions from Monterey and Santa Cruz counties. Relationships are formed, we move out of our bubbles, and we learn about each other. In these conversations we begin to hear about each other's needs and concerns, and we develop the trust necessary to act together. When these are widely felt, they become the issues COPA works on.

COPA leaders have worked to keep libraries open in Salinas, get affordable housing built across the region, and to pass school funding measures. COPA helped create Esperanza Care, a full-scope health care program in Monterey County for nearly 5,000 undocumented residents. And as the COVID pandemic tore through our region, disproportionately affecting our most vulnerable residents, COPA helped pass renter protections in Santa Cruz County and to create Project VIDA, a Monterey County program that employed over 100 Community Health Workers to get people tested, vaccinated, and connected to isolation resources to enable our economy to reopen.

Recently, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an advisory on “an epidemic of loneliness,” explaining, “When we are less invested in one another, we are more susceptible to polarization and less able to pull together to face the challenges that we cannot solve alone — from climate change and gun violence to economic inequality and future pandemics.”

In many of our faith traditions, the idea of covenant provides a template for understanding the way COPA thinks about our work. This means going above and beyond the social contract that establishes the state, government, and laws that bind us ... by widening our circles of attachment across income, social, cultural, religious, and racial divides – and creating moral commitments to one another, with shared values and ideals that compel us to work together, despite our differences, for the common good.

In other words, covenants exist between people who understand they are part of one another, making vows sealed by love. In the ancient Hebrew biblical story, from the Book of Ruth, though they were from different backgrounds and religions, and had lost their legal relationship with the deaths of their husbands, Ruth nevertheless promised her mother-in-law, Naomi, “Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

Our work with COPA helps our diverse institutions widen our circles of attachment – by joining in covenant with one another and COPA – to form meaningful public relationships and a commitment to work together for the common good.

When the Pajaro River flooded again this year, COPA leaders from Mujeres en Accion and Assumption Catholic Church were immediately on the scene. County officials sought out COPA's help to convene residents to better understand the needs, and COPA is currently negotiating with officials on the short and long-term responses. Some of this negotiation occurred May 20, when more than 500 COPA leaders assembled at the Golden State Theater in Monterey. Besides dealing with relevant issues like the Pajaro flooding, affordable housing, renter protections, and quality jobs, COPA will celebrate 20 years of working together and will renew our covenant with one another for the work ahead.

For information about how your institution can be part of this covenant, contact COPA.IAF1@gmail.com.