

COMMUNITIES ORGANIZED FOR RELATIONAL POWER IN ACTION
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A PACT FOR CHANGE

GROUP FORMS TO ADDRESS ISSUES OF CENTRAL COAST LIFE

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A new faith-based organization has formed on the Central Coast, members of which say they are committed to building low-cost housing, saving Monterey County's ailing hospital and improving education for Monterey and Santa Cruz county residents.

The multid denominational Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action, or COPA, was born Sunday at a ceremony that was a cross between an activist rally and a church sermon. The organization is the offspring of Central Coast Interfaith Sponsors, a Watsonville-based group formed three years ago to teach residents how to effect change at a grass-roots level.

COPA comprises more than 30 churches from eight denominations in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties.

More than 1,500 people, many who arrived in church-sponsored buses, packed into Sherwood Hall in Salinas to cheer the new organization and its leaders, their fellow parishioners.

"We are elated and grateful for your presence," said Bishop Sylvester Ryan of the Diocese of Monterey, which he said demonstrated "solidarity (among) ordinary folk who have accomplished extraordinary work."

Though the topics were heavy — people shared stories of unemployment, drug addiction and poverty — the ceremony was a festive occasion to

usher in the new group. Parishioners were greeted by mariachi outside the auditorium, while inside an organist performed between speakers.

Central Coast Interfaith Sponsors was formed in late 2000 and has since held several dozen assemblies, often with hundreds in attendance, where parishioners share stories about what worries them most about living in the area.

Among their top concerns: housing, immigration issues, education, safety, health care and jobs.

Those topics are now the six key issues which COPA's members say they want to improve.

City officials from Santa Cruz and Monterey counties, Assemblyman Simon Salinas and Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, attended Sunday's ceremony to declare their commitment to work with the group.

"I pledge to you a fight to make all housing affordable all over

this region," Farr told the group. He said the ceremony marked "one of the most special days I've ever seen."

Exactly how Farr or other elected officials will translate the group's enthusiasm into something tangible remains to be seen. The group on Sunday celebrated five "agreements" with elected officials:

➤ Farr said he would assign one of his own staff members to "develop (a) plan of action on housing."

➤ Salinas said he would invite group leaders to join him in Sacramento next week "to understand the state budget crisis."

"We want to work with experts who have solutions. But first, we have to listen to the experts of the problems."

Maria Elena Manzo
Madonna del Sasso Catholic Church



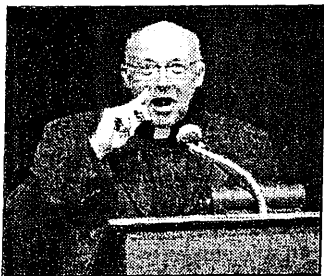
CLAY PETERSON/Special to The Herald

➤ An "action plan," developed by COPA and Salinas Mayor Anna Caballero, will focus on community safety.

➤ Monterey County Sheriff Mike Kanalakis said he would meet with the group to discuss immigration issues.

➤ Monterey County Supervisor Dave Potter said he would meet with COPA in August to discuss health care, particularly concerns regarding Natividad Medical Center. Faced with a \$9.6 million deficit, the county hospital is expected to cut back on services, including making layoffs and closing some clinics.

COPA member Pedro



Moreno, a physician at Natividad, related health care in Monterey County to a sinking boat. He said he was "committed to saving Natividad and making health care affordable to all of our county citizens."

Marsha Peoples, top, the Monterey District Churches of God in Christ representative, pins a Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action badge on her goddaughter, Alecia Tyler, 5, during the COPA inaugural ceremony at Sherwood Hall in Salinas on Sunday. Above, leaders are commissioned during the Central Coast Interfaith Sponsors Founding Assembly. The Rev. Mike Miller, of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Salinas, left, spoke at the ceremony.

COPA members are essentially parishioners of COPA member churches, roughly 30 of which were represented Sunday. Two people from each of the 31 "founding member" churches were designated as leaders Sunday — they will lead discussions and form action teams who will in turn work with elected officials.

For more information

More information about Central Coast Interfaith Sponsors can be obtained by calling 728-3210.

"We want to work with experts who have solutions," said COPA leader Maria Elena Manzo of Madonna del Sasso Catholic Church in Salinas. "But first, we have to listen to the experts of the problems."

The group will be supported financially by membership dues, the amount of which was not disclosed Sunday. Some of that money will go toward the salaries of COPA's three staff members, lead organizer Ken Smith, and associate organizers Carol Keeney and Barbara Meister.