

Crafting the People's Revolution in *El Barrio*: The Young Lords' People's Church

By Darrel Enck-Wanzer

Crafting the people's revolution is no easy task, as the New York Young Lords discovered on numerous occasions after their founding in 1969. Not only must one develop appropriate tactics in order to negotiate systemic constraints you must also manage to do so in conjunction with symbolic resources that articulate revolution as essential to the people and vice versa. For the Young Lords this revolutionary tradition was first set in motion over a hundred years earlier with Puerto Rico's *El Grito de Lares*; but the process they began to engage after 1969 was complicated, as well as enriched, by the diverse political and rhetorical traditions that characterized Puerto Rican nationalist thought. After successfully beginning the process of defining a revolutionary space in *El Barrio* through community agitation, the Lords turned their attention to expanding their activities in the community and concretizing what they had envisioned in their 13 Point Program and Platform when they used terms such as "community control," "self-determination," and "liberation."

One of the first points of this expansion revolved around the issue of health and, among other problems, lead poisoning in particular was reaching near epidemic proportions in New York City at that time. Reporting in the *Village Voice* in late-1969 Jack Newfield wrote: "Medical authorities estimate there are 30,000 undiagnosed cases of lead poisoning each year in the city. The victims are usually children between the ages of one and three, who eat flaking or peeling paint from tenement walls." In response to this health disaster and the city's inability (or unwillingness) to address it, the Young Lords struck a deal with the Health Department to administer detection tests for lead poisoning. Using the same kind of grassroots community organizing they had employed in the peaceful phase of the garbage offensive; the Lords leafleted *El Barrio* with flyers that read:

We are operating our own lead poisoning detection program with students from New York Medical College, beginning Tuesday, November 25, on 112th Street. The Young Lords and medial personnel will knock on your door Tuesday and ask to test your children for lead poison. Do not turn them away. Help save your children.

In addition to flyering, the Young Lords staged a sit-in to acquire the tests the Health Department had originally offered and, thereby, sparked increased community awareness of both the health problems associated with lead paint and the unacceptable performance of the city's Health Department.

While an important program in its own right, lead poisoning testing was symbolic of one of the most important points in the Lords' platform:

**WE WANT COMMUNITY CONTROL OF OUR
INSTITUTIONS AND LAND**

We want control of our communities by our people and programs to guarantee that all institutions serve the needs of our people. People's control of police, health services, churches, schools, housing, transportation and welfare are needed. We want an end to attacks on our land by urban renewal, highway destruction, universities and corporations.
LAND BELONGS TO ALL THE PEOPLE!

Community control of health programs and the lead poisoning testing program were the first of many attempts to assert the people's sovereignty and reduce reliance on an oppressive "system."

Various “serve the people” programs (named after their Black Panther counterparts) generated visibility and intense support for the Young Lords in El Barrio and bolstered their demands for community control, liberation, self-determination, and socialist redistribution. One example of increased community support came in the form of the community’s response to police harassment of the Young Lords. Speaking about an attempt by police to intimidate and provoke the Young Lords by surrounding the office one day, Pablo “Yoruba” Guzman recounts the community’s response: “The people came out into the street and were behind us. They asked what are they here for and we told them what they were here for. Our explanation made a connection with what happened to the Black Panther Party a week before and the people said ‘Why? You haven’t hurt anybody.’”

Within that context of increasing community awareness and support, the Young Lords sought out institutions they felt had not effectively served the needs of the community. In this effort, the Lords approached the First Spanish Methodist Church (FSMC) about using their facilities to run a free breakfast program for poor youth. Initially, the Lords appealed to the FSMC as part of a broader effort to connect with partners in their various outreach programs. Since churches were visible institutions and carried credibility among the people – and since the Chicago Young Lords made a local church a key focus of their initial community service efforts – the Lords worked to ensure that different churches were actually serving the communities where they operated.

The Young Lords discovered that most of the churches in El Barrio had some kind of community service program that assisted residents in ways other than spiritual and religious services. The FSMC, however, was a special and unfortunate case. Located in the middle of El Barrio, the FSMC only opened its doors on Sundays for official church services and, therefore, became an institution of particular interest to the Lords. According to Yoruba, “The First Spanish Church was chosen because it was right smack dead in the center of the Barrio. It’s a beautiful location right in the middle of the community. It was also chosen because it is the one church in the community that has consistently closed itself up to the community.” As such, the FSMC became the locus of conflict for the Lords and supporters.

Failing in their initial negotiations with the FSMC, the Young Lords made the decision to appeal directly to the membership of the congregation. On December 7, 1969, after having attended services and distributed flyers outside for the previous six Sundays, members of the Young Lords attended the Sunday worship again. At the end of the sermon, a period for free testimonial opened up and Felipe Luciano (then chairperson of the New York Young Lords chapter) attempted to speak to the 80-member congregation: “There is something wrong here,” Luciano said. “This is not a community.” Upon rising and, according to *New York Times* reporter Michael Kaufman, “interrupting the service,” Luciano and other Lords were confronted by police officers who had been standing by in anticipation. In the clash that followed, five Young Lords and three police officers were injured (Luciano the worst with a broken arm), and fourteen Young Lords were arrested. After the clash, about 150 people in the community took part in a march that ended at the FSMC. “At the church, the marchers stopped for a short rally at which they berated the police as ‘cowards’ and repeated their demand....”

In the weeks that followed, the Lords continued (progressively more forcefully) to negotiate with the FSMC leadership. Each Sunday, the Lords returned to the church services and requested from the parishioners an agreement to use the space for a free breakfast program, a daycare, a makeshift medical clinic (for tuberculosis and lead poisoning testing), and a “liberation school.” On December 21, for example, about 150 Young Lords and supporters attended Sunday worship. A brief discussion between the Lay board (the governing body of the FSMC), a representative of the church youth, and some Young Lords followed the service, after which Luciano delivered another plea to parishioners for use of the space. By that time, however, most of the church members had departed.

The following Sunday brought a substantial change in the scene when the Young Lords seized the church. As parishioners left at the end of services, “crosspieces were quickly nailed onto the church’s two doors, which were also chained from the inside.” Choosing to “take” the church rather than continue futile negotiations, the Young Lords pronounced a “liberated zone” “in the midst of occupied territory.” Promptly renaming the First Spanish Methodist Church as “the People’s Church,” the Young Lords began almost immediately to serve the community. According to a *New York Times* report, “Puerto Rican militants provided free meals, medical care, and history classes for neighborhood youngsters yesterday in an East Harlem church that they seized on Sunday.”

Outside the church, Luciano would later recall, “The community reacted very favorably. Leaflets, rallies, and marches through the streets proved effective in terms of getting the people out.” One mimeographed flyer read:

The struggle around the First Spanish Methodist Church that the Young Lords have been waging for the past two months has resulted in the transformation of that church into the new People’s Church. The Young Lords Organization, members of the community of “El Barrio” and their supporters liberated the church for the use of it by the people.... The Young Lords program calls for the immediate opening of the church to the people. The children of our community will have a free breakfast program and a Liberation School. No longer will they go to school hungry. No longer will the oppressor keep from them their true culture and the history of repression in America.

In all, the Lords made “the People’s Church” a sanctuary for the people – a place for learning and livelihood triumphing over, what they viewed as, an unresponsive and oppressive institution.

Lasting eleven days, “the People’s Church” was home to all of the programs (child care, free breakfasts, liberation school, tuberculosis and lead poisoning testing, etc.) the Young Lords sought to implement. Furthermore, the church became a political and social refuge for the people of El Barrio, and the residence of some 300 people. They hosted a children’s theatrical event (which was basically a play about “the People’s Church”), numerous speeches, poetry readings (including the first reading of Pedro Pietri’s famous poem, “Puerto Rican Obituary”), musical events, and more. At 6:30 in the morning on January 7, 1970, one hundred five Young Lords and supporters submitted to arrest, bringing a peaceful end to the church offensive.