



Connecting Faith to Works

Strategies for Working with Faith-Based Organizations

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FAITH COMMUNITIES HAVE ALWAYS PROVIDED FOR THOSE IN NEED in the United States, founding hospitals, social service agencies, and other organizations. While congregations continue to contribute to this work today through volunteerism, donations, and spiritual support for those involved in social service efforts, research shows that faith communities would rather work with nonprofits to provide complex services in their communities than attempt to do so themselves.¹ Recent research by the Faith and Organizations Project offers insights into how various Christian, peace church, and Jewish faith communities differ in the ways they go about providing social services and the approaches that would work best for pastors, priests, rabbis, and lay people seeking to work more effectively with faith-based organizations to provide these services.

The Faith and Organizations Project is a national research/practice project designed to help organizations and faith communities strengthen their relationship to each other and to assist faith-based organizations in maintaining their founding faith in agency practice. As a foundation for our future work, in 2006 we conducted a pilot study² of faith-based organizations in Philadelphia and the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area in which we explored the relationships between faith communities and the organizations they create, the role of founding religious values in organization structure and practice, the relationship of faith-based organizations to government and other organizations, and interactions between faith-based organizations and the people they serve. The study compared the experience of Catholic, Jewish, mainline Protestant, Quaker, Mennonite, and evangelical Christian organizations, revealing some interesting differences and suggesting effective approaches for those seeking to work with these organizations.

Faith-based organizations, we found, still reflect the unique faith of their founding religion, and these institutions provide opportunities for congregations to practice their religion's social theology. But, for many religions, theology is not so much overtly expressed as reflected in the structure and background practices of their organizations, and each religion has its own way of connecting nonprofits with individual congregations and larger faith community structures. Understanding these denominational differences can help clergy and laity better connect faith to works when working with faith-based nonprofits. Some key theological and structural differences are particularly important in determining the most effective ways to work with these organizations.

First of all, it's important to recognize that religions have developed two styles for providing supports in local communities. Catholics and Jews provide supports through *institutional* community-wide systems, with members usually working through the archdiocese or Jewish federation to contribute to nonprofits. In these religions, faith-based support is seen as the responsibility of the faith community as a whole rather than as individuals' acts

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of faith. In contrast, mainline Protestant, evangelical, and peace churches (Quaker, Mennonite, and Brethren) employ a *congregational* system, in which individuals' calls to serve are central to religious service and congregations are vital supporters for nonprofits. Differences between these two systems are based on theological variation.³

Mainline Protestants

Mainline Protestants, for instance, see the congregation as the fundamental organization fostering faith-based service. These congregations encourage their members to participate in "helping the stranger among you" or assisting those in need, as modeled in the biblical story of the Good Samaritan. They foster involvement through volunteerism, direct service provision, collecting donations, providing in-kind support, as well as sometimes creating faith-based organizations as a congregational project or through umbrella groups, such as interfaith organizations.

The strong connection between individual mainline Protestant congregations and their agencies means that mainline Protestant nonprofits involve congregations directly in service provision and also reach out to congregations for support. For example, a large, established Lutheran organization we studied depends on congregations to serve as primary sponsors for the refugees it helps. In another case, six African American Methodist congregations created a nonprofit that runs a youth program overseen by representatives from the congregations. Many of the program's staff and volunteers also come from those congregations.

Emphasis on individual faith underlies mainline Protestant social ministries. Calls to service harken from an obligation to practice faith through works. People become coworkers of and vessels for God in carrying out divine intentions on earth through vocation, calls by God to perform a particular meaningful activity. For example, one person's vocation might be working in an agency, while another may work in industry but organize clothing drives as a volunteer. In these communities, individuals' collective work contributes to the greater good.

Our study also showed that another hallmark of most mainline Protestant faith-based work is that it tends to downplay overt expressions of faith in order to offer service equally to all who need it. Based on a sense that the common good is best achieved by providing support to everyone, regardless of religion, all of the mainline Protestant organizations we studied stressed that volunteers and staff should be careful not to proselytize or use outward signs of religion in most programming. Most of the social service and youth programs we examined included no references to faith in their programs. However, behind the scenes, staff and volunteers were encouraged to rely on their faith, and sometimes the organizations offered religious opportunities for these workers. This embedded faith appeared in numerous ways in the congregations and organizations we studied. For example, in the youth program mentioned above, many of the youth said they did not perceive the program as offering any religious support, but the staff expressed an understanding of the religious underpinnings of the program's work and often prayed for individual youth among themselves.

These key elements of Protestant social ministry suggest the following important strategies for ministers, lay leaders, and people of other faiths working in or with mainline Protestant-founded organizations:

- Congregations should expect to provide direct service as part of faith-based activities. Pastors and lay leaders will need to develop volunteer recruiting and management skills and learn to work with organizations as partners in providing service.
- Connecting faith to works involves assisting congregants in clarifying vocation through work or volunteer activities. This discernment may involve working individually with people to clarify their missions or through group activities, such as helping teens develop a service activity based on calls to service. For people working in either faith-based or secular nonprofits, helping individuals discern vocation in their work is often helpful. For example, many nursing assistants and caseworkers reported that they relied on their faith to perform their demanding jobs.
- Congregations involved in service will need to understand how to walk the fine line of acting based on faith but not proselytizing.

Evangelical Christians

Our study revealed that evangelical organizations have much in common with mainline Protestants, including direct connections to congregations and a belief that work in the world reflects individuals' calls to service. As is true of mainline Protestant organizations, congregations are essential to evangelical church programs, providing in-kind support, donations, staff, and volunteers. However, we found that evangelical Christians express their religion more openly in their programs, believing that sharing their faith is an important part of providing service. Many evangelical Christian programs believe individual religious transformation is an important part of problem resolution.

In some evangelical organizations it was felt that moral teachings through Bible study and other religious practices should provide the framework for programming.

For example, one evangelical youth program for inner-city teens stressed "godly" behavior and included Bible study along with tutoring. In other cases religious references were melded with secular programming. For example, a seniors' program run by an evangelical African American church included prayers, gospel singing, and other references to religion, along with crafts and opportunities to travel. Participating seniors were asked if they had a "church home" and were encouraged to visit the sponsoring church. Most of the seniors self-selected into this openly religious program over a secular program located nearby. They reported feeling comfortable with the openly religious elements because they came from similar religious backgrounds. Many teens in the evangelical youth program also came from religious backgrounds, but it was less clear that they were at ease with the program's moral teachings.

The staff in these agencies had close ties to evangelical congregations, and used their faith in all aspects of their work. Staff discussions often addressed the importance of religion in programming, and volunteers were drawn from churches as well as Christian college youth programs.

Based on our research, the advice we offer to pastors from evangelical Christian congregations or those working with evangelical organizations includes the first two suggestions we made for mainline Protestants, but the role of religion in service provision is very different. Our pilot study findings suggest different strategies regarding religious involvement, as follows:


- Pastors and lay leaders from evangelical Christian congregations should select

service opportunities that are in keeping with evangelical churches' expectations that these opportunities will involve open religious practice and sharing of faith with program participants.

- Volunteers and staff working in evangelical organizations need to work through how the emphases on sharing faith and religious transformation relate to federal and state requirements on not using government funds for religious purposes or requiring participants to attend religious activities.⁴
- Evangelicals working with organizations founded by other faiths should always ask about these organizations' guidelines regarding the expression of religion with program participants.

Peace Churches

Quakers and Mennonites, we found, also have much in common with mainline Protestants. Their congregations are important in starting organizations and providing support to them. Quaker and Mennonite faith-based nonprofits also come out of individual calls to address



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a particular social problem. However, in these peace churches the community as a whole—usually an individual “meeting,” or congregation—tests the religious authenticity of any idea before it moves forward. Corporate involvement in the organization and ongoing discernment of the faith base for activities is an important part of work in the world for peace churches.

This system of community care means that peace church organizations that actively maintain ties to their founding faith often codify community involvement through board membership. Oversight of the organization is based on key tenets of peace church practice, such as nonviolence, simplicity, and “that of God in each individual.” Members of these faith communities may play a more active role than other churches in evaluating ways in which their organizations reflect the values of their faith.

Quaker organizations might be under the care of one or two meetings (congregations) or a quarterly or yearly meeting, administrative structures that bring together multiple congregations. Social service activity among Mennonites may be affiliated with the Mennonite Central Committee, which brings together Mennonites from various groups. Higher level Quaker and Mennonite entities are bottom-up structures responsive to the individual congregations and their members.

The Quaker belief in the spiritual presence within those served underlies peace church programs, translating into programming that respects the values of program participants and is tailored to the needs of the people being served, including respect for their religious traditions and cultures.

Peace churches involve all members of the community in decision making, and both their congregations and organizations lack hierarchy. These organizations tend to function as communities, using corporate decision making through consensus. Organizational charts tend to be flat, and all people involved in the organization, including volunteers and program participants, often become active in designing programs and participating in them. For example, in a Mennonite group home we studied, planning efforts included resi-

dents as well as all members of the staff.

As with mainline Protestants, peace church congregations and their members play a large role in their faith-based organizations. These organizations may offer religious activities based on their founding religions, but they often also include religious traditions of others. For example, the Mennonite group home mentioned above supports Faith and Light, a spiritual organization for the developmentally disabled founded by a Catholic priest.

People from all religions are encouraged to practice their faiths. In light of these characteristics, the following considerations are recommended for Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren, and people of other faiths who are working with peace church nonprofits:

- Volunteers, staff, and board members need to understand that programs focus on the program participants, and they should be prepared seek God within those served and to learn from this experience.

nization leaders and faith community members need to understand ways in which members can productively participate in the organization’s activities.

Catholics

In contrast to denominations following the congregational system, Catholic social welfare is seen as the responsibility of the church as a whole. Reflecting Catholicism’s hierarchical structure, the archdioceses or religious orders usually hold responsibility for the church’s organizations, with parishes working through higher level adjudicatories. For example, donations and volunteers are recruited through a bishop’s appeal or an archdiocese-wide volunteer opportunity. While Catholics are encouraged to participate in service, the parishes themselves are less likely to start initiatives, instead working through archdiocese structures or lay associations like St. Vincent de

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- Volunteers and the supporting community will play an active role in the organization. Volunteers may have much more of an opportunity for input than in organizations founded by other faiths. Stewardship of the organization may involve other members of the community in addition to the board, and issues within the organization may become discussion topics in the supporting communities.
- Peace church organizations serve as places where members of the religion can carry out their leadings. This means faith community members need to be prepared to help a member discern a call for services as well as provide oversight for an evolving organization. Established organizations also provide opportunities for service, which means that both orga-

Paul, an international lay person’s service organization that coordinates opportunities for service, such as in food pantries.

Catholic organizations rarely reach out to parishes directly for volunteers. Like the parishes, they also tend to work through archdiocese systems. For example, one Catholic agency we studied reported that some of its tutors came from a nearby parish, but our fieldworker found no volunteer recruitment materials at the parish. The center usually worked through the archdiocese to recruit volunteers and garner other supports from area Catholics.

While individual faith is an important aspect of service for Catholics, their participation is part of the corporate witness of the church and their responsibility as church members. The theology behind Catholic participation in these activities stems from church teachings elaborated

through doctrinal statements on social policy. Catholic social welfare reflects teachings on social justice and charity, with a dynamic tension existing between the two approaches. For example, Catholic Charities' mission is "to provide services to people in need, to advocate for justice in social structures, and to call the entire Church and other people of good will to do the same." Social justice activities reflect Vatican II and later encyclicals on various rights. Liberation theology also informs these activities. Charity involves assistance to the needy. To quote the United States Catholic Conference, "Charity is the greatest social commandment... Charity inspires a life of self giving."

Although Catholic parishioners participate in the same social support activities that people from other religions do, these characteristics and approaches suggest that expectations of strong parish involvement in social welfare activities are less appropriate for Catholics.

Our pilot study suggests the following strategies for organizations attempting to draw support from Catholic parishes and priests involved in social ministry:

- Work through the archdiocese systems or lay societies to garner volunteers and other supports from Catholics rather than contacting parishes directly.
- Connect social welfare activities to church teachings on justice and charity, helping parishioners understand these two alternative theological approaches to working with those in need and the connections between them.

Jews

Like the Catholic system, Jewish social welfare is organized communally, with many of the Jewish nonprofits operating under the auspices of the local Jewish Federation, a member benefit organization focused on planning and fundraising for social welfare, health, leadership development, and Jewish education. However, unlike the Catholic system, the Jewish system is not hierarchical and it separates social welfare provision from worship communities. Federations evolved from European *Kehillah*, the Jewish community administrative bodies that existed in the Middle Ages. However, in the U.S.,

Jewish congregations are completely separate from the Federations. Synagogue members relate to the Federations as individual members, contacting the Jewish social welfare system through individual agencies or Federation-wide referral systems. Federations run fundraising efforts for member agencies and other Jewish causes.

Jewish social welfare is highly professionalized, using fewer direct-service volunteers than organizations founded by other religions. Local chapters of member organizations like B'nai Brith and Hadassah support social service and health initiatives through fundraising and volunteer service, but this rarely involves the level of direct service volunteering common among Protestants. Jewish congregations do not expect agencies to reach out for volunteers or program participants directly. For example, one Jewish agency in our study found congregations puzzled by or unresponsive to requests to inform them directly about agency services. (The agency made no attempt to seek volunteers from these congregations.)

Two theological concepts lie behind Jewish social welfare provision: *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*. *Tzedakah* combines the concepts of charity and justice. Jews believe they have a duty to care for the less fortunate, preferably through mechanisms that will enable these individuals to take care of themselves. For example, the Philadelphia Jewish Federation sought Jewish professionals to provide guidance to Soviet Jews from the same professions, hoping that these relationships would lead to professional employment for the refugees. *Tikkun olam* is Hebrew for "to heal the world," but Jews debate whether this means providing succor to other Jews or to the larger community.

Two suggestions emerge from our study of the ways in which the Jewish faith connects to work in the world:

- Involving Jews in social welfare activities is best accomplished through Jewish agencies, the local Jewish Federation, or by reaching out to individuals directly (rather than through outreach to congregations). However, Jews have a long history of participating in advocacy and social justice activities through congregations and it is appropriate to

contact Jewish congregations to let them know about opportunities to participate in these activities.

- Drawing on the social justice aspects of *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*, some Jewish congregations have become involved in interfaith activities or other social welfare activities. Interfaith outreach using these concepts may garner the best reception.

General Implications

Taken together, the findings of the Faith and Organizations pilot study suggest that clergy and lay leaders should pay attention to the unique theological, cultural, and structural aspects of each religion when attempting to involve the faithful in social welfare activities. Using strategies appropriate for each religion and connecting service activities to that religion's theology will lead to more successful and meaningful experiences for all concerned. ♦

NOTES

1. Ram A. Cnaan, *The Invisible Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare* (New York: University Press, 2002) and Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
2. Copies of the pilot study report and information on the project are available at home.gwu.edu/~jschneid.
3. For more information, see Jo Anne Schneider, "Organizing Faith-based Service: Congregational vs. Institutional Models," *Family and Community Ministries: Empowering through Faith*, Summer 2007.
4. A discussion of separation of church and state in faith-based nonprofits is available through the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy at <http://www.religionandsocial-policy.org/>.

Future Work

Additional Faith and Organizations Project studies are planned. Those interested in the Project's pilot study or future work may contact Jo Anne Schneider at jschneider@ubalt.edu or 410-837-6145 for additional information. Additional information is also available at home.gwu.edu/~jschneid.