

Guidance for Faith Groups Maintaining Connections to Their Social Service Organizations through Board Appointments



Is your church, synagogue or mosque involved in serving others through a separate service organization? This document focuses on the volunteer service that trustees or members of Boards of Directors make in such an organization. What relationship does being a member of a Board serving others have to the founding faith congregation? How can that relationship be most beneficial?

Many service organizations – retirement communities, schools, food pantries, development organizations – are founded by religious communities. Some of them continue to have board appointment from the religious community. Most of those founded by Mainline Protestant organizations are separate nonprofits. Many require that some of their board members be appointed by congregations of faith. Those founded by Catholics may either be under the authority of the archdiocese or a religious order, although many are incorporated independently. Parish schools and other lay organization boards come primarily from lay leaders in the parish. Catholic boards often include lay people as well as clergy. Jewish organizations generally draw board members from the local Jewish community, sometimes from the leadership and board development programs of the local Federation.

One of the things learned in the Faith and Organizations Project is that the number of members of a board who represent the founding faith can vary from a very few to 100% - but the percentage on the board is not a strong factor in whether the board reflects the faith. That is to say, an organization with only a few members appointed by a faith group can reflect that faith as much as one with many members from the faith group. So what does it take to reflect the mission of the founding faith community?

Board members need to understand and participate in faith activities. They should be respected members of the worshipping community. Indeed, it is helpful if they can - and do - articulate the values of the faith. Articulating the role of faith for the services being offered is key to maintaining the mission of the nonprofit; however, board members need more than this. They also need to be willing to work in a group, to take on responsibility for leadership in some area, and to be enthusiastic about the mission of service. Board members are often drawn from individuals who have volunteered already in an organization, so they have a personal experience of its work. Making that personal experience come alive will make them a great asset as a board member.

Prior experience on a board is helpful, but not essential, particularly if training on board participation occurs for board members. Successful boards of directors regularly take time simply to learn how to do their jobs, whether in monthly study sessions, annual retreats, or both. Sometimes members of boards join others from similar organizations at training provided by an umbrella organization; for example Friends Conference on Education provides workshops for members of boards of Quaker schools and other Quaker organizations.

If you are a member of a group responsible for identifying new members of a Board of Directors you will need to find out what skills the board needs. Does it need someone who has an in-depth understanding of the mission, whether that is education or service to the disadvantaged? Does it

This resource is designed for faith community lay leaders, clergy, and staff or board members of Faith Based Organizations (FBO) to help provide guidance on building and maintaining connections with the faith community through board appointments.

We outline key findings about how FBOs approach the issue of board appointments and suggest strategies for strengthening connections with the faith community to build a stronger, and more effective boards for the benefit of both the FBOs and their Faith Communities.

need an experienced fundraiser or someone with in-depth financial or legal knowledge? Rarely can a board accept a new member who simply is a member of the faith group; all members have real tasks in addition to an understanding of the underlying faith motivation to service.

Here are some ideas about how you, as a member of a faith group involved in appointing board members, can help a service organization thrive:

- 1. Tell your service organization representatives what you expect them to do. How are the values of your faith reflected in the work of the nonprofit? What values would you like to see reflected there? What should they do? What should they not do?**

Make sure that they know what the faith community expects to see in the organization. Board members will be obligated to uphold the service organization and may become over focused on aspects of the services being offered. Remind them of the reason for the services. And let them know how they can keep the faith community informed about the services.

It may surprise you, but this simple activity isn't being done very often – and it can make a difference. Organizations like Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, which are governed by a group of primarily Catholic lay men and women are given by-laws which include this element, but most organization's by-laws do not.

- 2. Set up some place of accountability in your faith community whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim.**

Does the congregation receive a regular report from the faith organization? Is that report simply about the business of the faith organization, or does it include reflection on how the faith is present within the work? Is there a time for individuals from within the faith group to ask questions, or for the service providers to think deeply about the work? A conversation that goes beyond financial reporting and program statistics should be sought by both sides.

Quaker organizations typically require service organizations to report annually to the worshipping community. A formal report is prepared, but it is accompanied by informal conversation among staff, board members and any Quakers who are able to join in. These conversations provide a great opportunity for presenting strengths as well as struggles in the life of the service organization.

Another kind of accountability structure is reflected in a Catholic order that founded a hospital, but found itself with few Catholics involved in leadership. The hospital created a required training program for senior staff and board members of the hospital system. In this training the founding values of the Catholic system are explored and further developed. Staff recognizes their indebtedness to this program and commit to keeping up the faith values at the roots of the institution.

- 3. Nurture informal relationships between people. Articulate faith values there.**

Nothing expresses faith better than an individual talking about it. But involvement as a volunteer, whether as a Board member or doing service, may not generate occasions to talk about why one is performing a service. Recalling one's underlying motivation to serve and one's faith belief is valuable. On one hand, it helps bring one back to the big picture from the detail. On the other, it reminds us of the value of the service work we do.

Trust is built in personal relationships between individuals. This trust is more highly valued than confidence that an organization will provide an annual report. Volunteering in a service organization

usually is very rewarding and truly engages an individual. This service should be recognized and honored, encouraging others to also volunteer.

Relationships between faith group members and individuals served by the organization are also valuable. Some faiths try vigilantly to serve others without proselytizing, but occasionally sharing one's motivation for service or one's beliefs is far short of proselytizing. Sharing them occasionally nourishes both the speaker and the hearer. For example, Evangelical groups provide service as both an expression of faith and an opportunity for sharing one's faith.

Most interfaith organizations sponsor one or more events each year to celebrate volunteers and incidentally, share some program reports. Why shouldn't faith communities also acknowledge those who volunteer outside of the faith itself? A word of thanks and appreciation goes a long way, and the faith group is strengthened in its awareness and presence in the service organization by the volunteer activities.

4. Consider by-laws requirements for maintaining a faith perspective.

By-laws are usually very concrete and focused on organizational procedure, but they can include things which preserve a perspective. For example, Quaker organization by-laws often require use of Quaker process, which reflects Quaker values. Jewish organizations exist because, as a matter of faith, Jews believe in caring for the community. These are obvious faith reflections, but there can be others.

A by-laws statement of the purpose of the organization can reflect the faith background of the project. Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington has such by-laws. If it does reflect the faith, the organization is always reminded of those values. If it does not have any indication of the faith motive or values, should it be changed? One project which did not have such requirements recently closed down, lacking any on-going commitment from the faith community.

Either Board members or members of sponsoring congregations can suggest by-laws revisions. Most organizations periodically review by-laws, but anyone can make that suggestion at any time.

Some organizations require that the faith group validate any change in the mission or purpose of the service group. Such a requirement requires that faith values be considered in framing the mission statement or even be included within it. Recently, the board of GEDCO, an ecumenically based nonprofit in Baltimore, rejected a by-law change which would have diluted the faith statement in the mission of the organization. Board members felt that connection to the faith determined the organization, rather than being simply supplemental in its function.

This method could help preserve faith values in organizations which exist independent of a worshiping congregation, as well. Most main-line Protestant service organizations actually exist outside of the church. That is to say, they are independent organizations. Churches, however, care for members of the boards of these organizations and can have an influence on such organizations through their members.

5. Encourage the development and maintenance of umbrella organizations.

Many service organizations belong to umbrella organizations to share information about their work. For example, Quaker services for the elderly mostly belong to Friends Services for the Aging. Jewish organizations often belong to the Federation. Catholic Charities agencies usually belong to Catholic Charities USA.

While the principal role of such an organization is to support the services provided, the organization usually recognizes that providing workshops and training for boards and staff on aspects of their founding values is also important. So Friends Conference on Education provides workshops for Board members on how to reflect Quakerism in Friends Schools, and also provides training on Quaker values and philosophy to new staff – most of whom are not Friends.

Staff who have participated in these trainings credit them highly – and such trainings reach more people efficiently and with more consistent messages than an individual congregation can provide in reaching out to train staff or board members.

Members of local congregations can support these services by taking an interest in these umbrella groups, or developing a group where one does not exist. Perhaps you can help with a workshop on the faith perspective.

These suggestions provide some options for structuring an on-going relationship between the faith community and the service organization. Whatever vehicles are developed to achieve and sustain this relationship, it is vitally important to structure the process, take it seriously and regularly examine the results. In that way the values and principles of the faith community, for which the service was created, will more likely flourish in the daily work and mission of the organization.

About the Faith and Organizations Strategies Series

This resource draws on the *Faith and Organizations Project*, which used case studies from 81 organizations to understand the ways that faith based nonprofits and their sponsoring faith communities sustain their relationships. The project looked for strategies that help faith based organizations (FBOs) maintain ties to supporting faith communities, while providing quality services. It compared strategies across religions (Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Evangelicals, Quakers, and African American Christians), and among FBOs offering social services, health and senior services, education and community development.

This is one of eight pamphlets in a series. Readers interested in board issues may especially want to see companion strategies documents on *Volunteers, Conflicts and Maintaining Connections between Faith Communities and FBOs*. Further readings on the issue of FBO board members can be found in the supplementary document *Readings for the Faith and Organizations Strategies Series*. The project also offers a self-assessment instrument series to help FBOs and faith communities understand the strength and weaknesses of their current relationship. These documents, general findings and reports for each religion are available at www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu.

