Sustaining Vital Connections between Nonprofits and Their Faith Communities:

Faith and Organizations Project

Instructor's Notes

This curriculum aims to give faith community leaders a theoretical framework and practical guidance for relating effectively to nonprofits as a way of furthering the work of the church in the world. It draws on the Faith and Organizations Project (www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu), which looked carefully at the relationship between diverse faith communities (congregations, denominations, religious bodies and/or networks) and faith-based organizations.

See the description of the background and purpose for this unit on the General Information sheet.

Unit Contents

Learning activities for this unit include:

- Assigned reading with discussion questions, along with a list of supplemental sources relating to the community service work of churches and faith-based organizations.
- Power point on the findings of the study, with integrated questions for discussion.
- A set of more detailed notes to accompany the power point presentation.
- Optional supplemental assignment (described below).

Any of these can be modified to fit the overall course objectives, students' background, and time frame for the unit.

The assigned reading totals about 200 pages. For a shorter reading assignment, the list may be modified to include:
- Executive summary
- "Comparing strategies" report – choose 1 religion
- Strategies Series – choose 1 topic
- Ammerman, chapters 5 and 6 (skim)
- Schneider, *Organizing Faith-Based Service*

One or more of the reading discussion questions may be assigned as journal reflections.

Learning Objectives

In this unit, students will:

1. Appreciate the role of nonprofits as vehicles for faith communities to carry out their work of compassion and justice in the community, and the importance of maintaining vital connections between the faith community and these organizations.
2. Learn a broader definition of "stewardship" as well as the concept of "practical theology" as these apply to faith community connections with nonprofits.
3. Identify three "faith tradition systems" by which faith communities organize their connections to nonprofits (Institutional, Congregational and Network systems), and understand the relevance of these systems to the effective stewardship of connections.
4. Grasp the differences and similarities in how various faith traditions manage their connections with nonprofits in order to achieve their goals for ministry in the community.
5. Develop tools for critical reflection on how their faith tradition sees the relationship between faith, works, and witness, as well as practical strategies for carrying this out in the context of nonprofit ministry.
6. Discover the key challenges facing faith-based organizations and consider research-based suggestions for addressing them.

Case Study Assignment

As an optional complement (or alternative) to the reading and class discussion questions, students may be assigned a case study of the connection between a nonprofit and its supporting faith community. This will include:

- A site visit if possible to observe any visible indications of a faith connection.
- Interviewing a nonprofit leader about the theological framework for their work, their connections with the faith community, and their greatest challenges or conflicts relating to issues of faith in the context of fundraising, staff/volunteers, vision and values, and management or leadership style.
- Interviewing a leader in the faith community that sponsors or supports the nonprofit, asking similar questions.
- A 3-5 page paper (or a 10-15 minute presentation) that (a) describes the nonprofit and its supporting faith community, (b) identifies how the faith tradition and practical theology influences the nonprofit's goals and activities; (c) the nature of the connection with the faith community, including both formal and informal elements; and (d) gives recommendations for strengthening this relationship and/or meeting faith-related organizational challenges.

The discussion questions that refer to nonprofit examples can help students think through the elements of this assignment.

Notes for the Instructor

- It is important for the instructor to become familiar with the Executive Summary in order to be able to present the aims and findings of the study. The instructor may also want to skim the full Faith and Organizations Project report (which can be downloaded at http://www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu/reports.html).

- Although the Faith and Organizations Project studied six different religious traditions (including Jewish), this curriculum focuses on three major Protestant streams of Christianity (Mainline, African American and Evangelical). The discussion can be tailored to the faith tradition most relevant to the class. However, keep in mind that one of the learning objectives is to expose students to other religious traditions in addition to helping them better understand their own.

- It should also be noted though there are other Christian traditions (e.g., Latino, Fundamentalist, Pentecostal, Immigrant/Ethnic streams) as well as other religions (e.g., Islam) in the American religious fabric that were not covered in the research project.

- This unit uses the language of "faith community" to be inclusive of congregations, denominations, umbrella agencies, and other religious bodies or networks that may connect with the work of faith-based nonprofits. While most seminary students may be preparing for church leadership, the role of these other types of faith community should be acknowledged.

- In responding to discussion questions about their "faith community," most students will likely refer to their congregation and/or denomination. They are not limited to these categories, however; their response may include any form of religious group with which they closely identify.

- Some discussion questions ask students to reflect on a specific faith-based organization in their experience. "Faith-based organization" in this context includes any nonprofit that has some connection, past or present, with a faith community, whether or not it has an overtly religious identity or mission.