

**Thinking about Partnerships among  
Faith Communities, Faith-Based  
Organizations and Government in a  
New Way: Observations from the *Faith  
and Organizations Project***



Religious communities and faith-based organizations play vital roles in the United States in education, health care, senior services, community development, and the provision of a wide range of social services. This prominent role long preceded the 1996 welfare reform law and the federal faith-based initiatives that have brought special attention to government partnerships with religious service organizations. Today, many faith-based organizations (FBOs)—from nationally prominent groups like the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and Jewish Vocational Services to lesser known grassroots organizations—play vital roles in the social safety net. Catholic, Jewish, and other religious hospitals and clinics are a significant presence in many communities. Religious schools offer an alternative to public schools. Most emergency food, clothing, and shelter agencies are faith-based.

And yet there remains considerable misunderstanding about how religion shapes these faith-based services and about the legal aspects of their work of service to society. The *Faith and Organizations* project was founded in 2001 to bring greater clarity to these matters. The project originated in faith community leaders' concern about the appropriate relationship they should maintain with the nonprofits they founded, especially given that many of those organizations now receive most of their funding from government and secular private sources. These leaders were interested in practical managerial and stewardship concerns. As such, the project approached a variety of issues of concern to policy makers with a different lens, asking not "How can we best partner with government?" but "How do we support, sustain, and guide our organizations given that many serve people outside our faith, often using government funding?"

The project also compared approaches among religious groups, identifying unique and similar strategies among Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Evangelicals, Peace churches (Quakers, Mennonites), Muslims, and African-American Christians. This policy statement draws primarily from a major project funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc. called *Maintaining Vital Connections Between Faith Communities and their Organizations* (2008-2010). To date, the project has produced several overview reports, detailed reports on each religion, a series of strategy documents on various topics designed for faith community and FBO leaders, curriculum and workshop guidelines for several audiences, case histories of participating organizations, and academic articles. These publications are available at <http://www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu>.

The project did not examine the effectiveness of FBOs. Nor did it analyze constitutional issues, although it found that a majority of the FBOs studied were aware of their legal obligations.

## **Policy Implications**

Two key findings are particularly relevant for policy audiences. (1) Despite a common assumption that all faith-based service is rooted in congregations, the study found three different systems used by different faiths. *Institutionalized systems* (Catholics, Jews) centralize social welfare and health activities through community wide institutions like a diocese, order, or Jewish Federation. *Congregational systems* (Mainline Protestants, Peace churches, African-American Protestants, some Evangelicals) rely on congregations to support FBOs. *Network systems* (primarily Evangelicals) bring together loose networks of individuals sharing a common faith-based vision to support a ministry. (2) Most FBOs embed their religious traditions in the structure, operating methods, and values of the organization, while fewer use explicit religious elements in their services, and few proselytize to those who come for help.

Religion is present in many different ways in the varied nonprofit organizations with their varied religious roots. The actual reality of faith-based service organizations is much more complex than is often assumed in public policy and legal discussions.

***This brief statement highlights a few aspects of the complex and diverse ecology of religious service organizations, pointing to the need for the law and policy to better understand the diversity of real religious institutions. Instead of making recommendations, we suggest the value for policymakers of a better understanding of the complex reality of religion in the functioning of faith-based organizations.***

## **Some possible consequences for policy and law**

***Note: The government rightly maintains certain standards for its relationships with faith-based and secular organizations. These standards are rooted in the twin constitutional requirements that government protect the free exercise of religion and avoid establishing religion. (We recognize that these standards are not fixed or precise but evolve by way of Supreme Court decisions.) The government must maintain constitutional principles even though the corresponding rules may in one or another instance appear to favor or disfavor particular religious nonprofits because of what they do or how they do it.***

### **1. Religion appears in diverse ways in faith-based services.**

The reality of faith-based services—as experienced by those served by them, those who serve in them, and government officials who interact with them—is often very different than the abstract schemas assumed in constitutional law deliberations and in statutes and regulations. Religion is not binary—present or absent—but rather is a pervading reality, sometimes obvious in rituals and symbols, at other times embedded in personnel choices, service styles, and management practices. It is reflected in the distinctive ways that different faith communities relate to—manage, support, interact with—their faith-based service organizations. This does

not mean that organizations offer religion in place of social services but rather that their ways of serving are shaped by the ideals of their respective faith communities. Because of those ideals, a particular nonprofit will be more, or less, inclined to work with government or organizations of other faiths; it will have access to the particular resources of some particular faith community or some ecumenical set of congregations and not other resources; it will interpret its work in one way instead of another; it will have a firm commitment about the rightness of one kind of personnel policy or another approach.

***These different ways of serving, staffing, managing, and collaborating are not incidental to the organization but inherent in it; they are aspects of its faithfulness to a set of ideals that emerge out of its faith tradition.***

## **2. Conditions for flourishing.**

Whether the faith is overt (certain rituals) or “embedded” (manifest non-verbally in a style of decision-making, organizational structure, a preference for ecumenical collaboration, or some other aspect of operations), it is regarded as a vital aspect of the organization by those who brought it to life and by the faith community that supports it. To keep the connections to the religious tradition alive, for example, many organizations typically regard it to be important to draw board members and key staff largely from their faith community, although specific practices differ. When the faith’s “practical theology” is no longer manifest in the service organization, the organization loses the enthusiastic support of its community, resulting in receiving fewer resources (volunteers, funds) and suffering weak board members, leading to a downward spiral.

***Government or private entities partnering with faith communities and their organizations need to understand and pay attention to the unique strategies of each faith, rather than assume that all share the same strategies and then impose one template on all.***

## **3. Leveraging religious resources.**

Private and government funders sometimes require a match from grantees, may favor applicants who bring their own resources to the table (volunteers, other funding, free space, the neighborhood’s trust), or may be glad to support organizations that can use their own resources to supplement or surround the services a grant will fund. Faith-based organizations, supported by and embedded in particular supportive communities (a Mainline or black congregation, an ecumenical network of congregations, a Catholic diocese or order, a Jewish Federation, a loose grouping of fellow evangelical Protestant churches and individuals) often have resources in addition to those that outside funders can provide.

***But these resources will dry up if the service organization does not maintain a vital connection to its founding faith. Funders should be mindful of restrictions they place on potential grantees, lest such restrictions attenuate this vital faith connection.***

#### 4. Intermediaries.

Some faith-based organizations come with an intermediary structure already in place while in many other instances such a structure has to be created—and yet how that can be done in one faith tradition will not work in another faith tradition. Mainline Protestant service organizations at the local level may be connected together in an ecumenical network such as an interfaith organization that brings together multiple congregations to support the organization. Catholic non-profits are often supported by national professional organizations like Catholic Charities USA or the Catholic Health Association in addition to receiving support and religious policy guidance from their sponsoring diocese or order. Jewish organizations are embedded in strong local federation structures through which planning, funding, training, volunteers, and suggestions for board members are managed. In addition, national professional organizations for local Jewish social-service entities and community centers provide guidance and serve as key networks to locate staff. Evangelical Protestant service providers may be linked with other such entities through loose national networks but often have no formal connections to larger umbrella groups. Peace churches have founded umbrella organizations for their faith-based organizations, like Friends Services for the Aging, that offer centralized insurance and quality assurance, as well as technical support. An African-American nonprofit may have strong informal ties to its founding congregation, but that congregation may have little expertise or managerial capacity to offer to it.

***Government agencies that regard intermediaries to be a fruitful way to connect with grassroots organizations should take into account whether and how those grassroots organizations are already connected together and to larger organizations within various faith traditions. Using these existing structures rather than creating new ones that must follow generic government rules would be a more productive way to work with faith based nonprofits.***

These observations were prepared by Stanley Carlson-Thies (Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance) and Jo Anne Schneider (Faith and Organizations project director). We are grateful for advice from the Policy Committee: Robert Destro (Columbus School of Law at Catholic University), Richard Foltin (American Jewish Committee), Stephen Monsma (Henry Institute at Calvin College), and Jeremy White (Restore Hope Consulting). The views reflected herein are not necessarily those of any individual member of the Policy Committee.

**For more information on the Faith and Organizations Project please visit our website**  
[www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu](http://www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu) Email contact: jschneid@gwu.edu.