Cookman United Methodist Church and Alternative School Agency History

Early History:

Cookman United Methodist Church (CUM) has a long history of active engagement in the community, stemming from the former pastor, RH (approximately: 1970-1990) and then under the current pastor, Donna Jones, since 1990. CUM was one of the first religious congregations to receive federal funding under the new "charitable choice" clause in PRWORA "welfare reform" legislation (1996).

The congregation offers several other on-going social programs for the community at large including an after school program for younger youth; a community dinner on Friday nights; a drop in "teen lounge" for youth; coordinates a city-wide program called PATCH, which is a team model of working with about 600 youth, their families, their school, and other agencies (juvenile court) to guide a youth into less-at-risk standing. For many years, the congregation allowed an AA meeting, a Senior Center (no longer), and "People United Together" to have meeting or office, and temporary apartment space to these groups. Cookman also makes its parish building – a rowhome adjacent to the church building, available to various people who need shelter or housing for a temporary or short-term basis.

Current Situation:

CUM and its associated social programs, including the "home-school" model of instruction for community youth who work on credits for graduation from high school through the congregation's alternative learning community. There are approximately 60-75 youth who participate annually in this alternative school. Most of the youth are referred from Department of Human Services and are at risk of truancy, drop out, and a host of other risk behaviors for older adolescents (ages 14-21).

The congregation still supports 2 apartments available in the parish building, to select individuals in transition. The congregation is not large – maybe 150 members on role with 40-

60 active each Sunday. The congregation budget and financial resources from tithes/offerings are modest.

One of the more interesting aspects of this site, for this study is the following. The organization had started to form a separate 501(c)3 arm for programmatic activities (2000-2004) but has since redirected and decided to keep the programmatic aspects under the supervision of the congregation. Two separate boards exist which both provide oversight for the programmatic arms: There is a "traditional" church board, and there is a "program council" which appears to provide more of the management oversight for the various programs on a day to day basis. Pastor Jones is the Executive Director and the Program Director also chairs the Program Council and is a member of the church.

Relationship between "programmatic arm" and faith community:

Pastor Jones relies heavily on the input of key staff, (about 8) half of whom are also members of the congregation, to influence the culture and "faith-base" of the programs. Overall, of the 21 staff on the directory, just less than half (10) are also members of the church.

Many staff here are implicitly, at their jobs because of their faith commitment, but the programs receive public funds and have learned to be more nuanced in how they bring issues of faith or religion into the programmatic activities of the church. There is some reserve in discussing how this has affected how they do their work. I sense that there is some "secularization" of services that goes along with being more conscious of maintaining separation of church and state issues, and with being accountable to outside funders about how funds are spent, hours and persons served, and quality of service. And yet, the staff here also maintain and are encouraged to talk about their deep sense of faith and religious motives for doing their work and relating to program participants.

Because the relationship between the faith-based nature of the staff and the necessity to assure public and outside funders that the service upholds respect for clients and serves all faith and no faiths equally, there is an evolving culture that is difficult to distinguish from the "professionalization" and funding issues that affect all small nonprofit organizations.

The congregation is under the auspices of the United Methodist Church, Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. Each year, the pastor has to get a re-appointment from the conference (Charge conference). And yet the Conference is not a financially large supporter of the sizeable ministries of the church (program budget ranges from 500K to 1M/year).

The programs maintain a strong faith-base implicitly, without appearing to do "explicitly". I believe this is related to the key staff – Pastor Jones and Director of Programs, Treasurer, and directors of various programs being deeply faith-based/religious, and having overlapping roles with the programs and within the congregation, rather than external practices of staff prayer or religious teaching. The decision to keep the programmatic activities under the congregation rather than form a separate nonprofit was a key and intentional strategy by Pastor Jones.

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