

Strategies to Maintain Connections between Faith Communities and Faith Based Organizations



Practical Theology and Stewardship – Reasons for Maintaining Connections

Faith Based Organization (FBO) processes are influenced by their founding and history – which is in part, “religious”—because of its historical affiliation with a founding religion or continuing relationship with a religious denomination. The founding faith communities feel an obligation to provide guidance and support to the non-profits they sponsor, understanding this obligation as *stewardship*. Here we define ***stewardship as the faith community’s efforts to maintain its practical theology of justice and charity in the activities of the nonprofits affiliated with that religion or denomination.***

While many current religious thinkers have narrowed the religious concept of stewardship to mean fundraising and financial accountability, this project found that faith communities practice stewardship in a much broader sense. Stewardship could mean providing board members, the faith community holding ultimate responsibility for key decisions related to by-laws of form of the organization, providing space for organization activities in faith community property, helping the organization find funding or in-kind resources, faith community volunteers assisting the organization, faith community members providing guidance to the organization on how its faith tradition should be reflected in organization programs and structures, or simply faith community members paying attention to the organization’s activities and approach to providing service. Stewardship can also involve preaching to encourage people to become involved with FBOs. For example, one pastor reported:

I preach and promote that we are to be the center, the social center of God’s kindness... Our people get involved practically, our congregation actually adopts the seniors and the school families and so they have a personal connection to that family.

Stewardship also includes the use of faith and hence maintaining the connection to practical theology. Practical theology refers to the key beliefs and practices that faith communities use to carry out their faith based activities. Practical theology also includes both explicit use of faith such as quoting theological statements or scripture, religious symbols, and religious based practices associated with governance. More often, practical theology is embedded in the culture of organizations and the particular nature of the relationship between faith communities and the organizations they have created. Of major importance in practical theology is the view of God (the “vertical” relationship) which motivates and shapes the work of service in the world (the “horizontal” relationships).

We did not find a theologically-driven, point-to-point connection between the stated mission of the organization, such as through a mission statement or use of scripture, and the organizations’ daily activities. Interviewees were very good at describing “This is what we do...” and were less expressive in describing “...and this is the reason we do this, in this way....” Few participants vocalized explicit theological commitments or values in this manner.

This resource is designed for faith based organization (FBO) leaders - executive directors, fundraising and outreach staff, board members, clergy, lay leaders and policy makers to help understand the importance of maintaining connections and religion-specific strategies to help FBOs thrive.

We outline key findings about the importance of maintaining ties to the founding faith community and its traditions for both faith communities and FBOs and offer suggestions on ways that these ties can be strengthened.

Organizations “organize themselves” or make decisions in different ways for example:

- For Quakers, a commitment to consensus affects the way they make decisions, as opposed to a theological view which supports a democratic style of group decision making.

A Quaker retirement community, located on land donated by Quaker families and under the care of a Friends Meeting (congregation), appoints a portion of its board, expects regular reports from the organization, and where some Meeting members work, volunteer, and others have become residents. The organization could not make radical changes to its by-laws or mission without permission from the founding Meeting. There is regular communication between the retirement community and the sponsoring Meeting, both informal communication between people associated with the retirement community and Meeting members and regular communications to Meeting members about events at the retirement community.

- African American congregations and denominations’ respect for charisma suggests that acknowledged leaders have considerable influence over group decisions.

For example in African American churches, congregation pastors served as the CEOs for most of the ministries affiliated with that church, even if they were separate non-profits. These clergy would use both their pulpits and personal energy to involve church members in the organization.

- Jews developed a centralized planning and fundraising system called Federations. Many Jewish FBOs are members of their local federations.

A Jewish nonprofit is a member of its local Jewish Federation through a contractual agreement that involves the nonprofit in collaborations with other Federation agencies. The Federation provides community planning and raises a portion of agency funds. Its board is entirely Jewish, drawn from the local community. When it recently bought a new building, the Federation sponsored Jewish Community Relations Council helped it lobby for state funds to assist with the purchase. Other capital donations came from board members and others in the Jewish community. This agency runs some programs in partnership with synagogues and the Jewish community pays attention to its activities through phone calls and reports in the local Jewish newspaper.

Each religion in the study had unique differences, which we outlined in detail in the overview reports and reports on each religion.

As with these Quaker and Jewish agencies, we found three broad systems that religious communities use to organize their connections to organizations under their care that reflect practical theology and stewardship strategies. These systems come out of the faith communities, shaping both the stewardship strategies of religious institutions and the ways nonprofits from that religious tradition approach faith communities for support and guidance.

Stewardship Systems

Institutionalized systems organize and centralize supports at the faith community wide level, with expectations that the entire faith community is responsible for those in need. The faith community maintains strong connections with its centralized institution that it was part of – Federation, archdiocese, or Order institutions. These institutions would play a role in appointing board members, allocating resources, planning, and other supports from nonprofits from that religion. Jews and Catholics used this system.

- Local Federations generally provide guidance, some fundraising, and other supports for many Jewish organizations and those not affiliated with the Federation sometimes benefit from its community wide planning, leadership development, and volunteer banks.

- Catholic systems, organizations are under the authority of either an archdiocese or order, although many order sponsored health care institutions are now part of larger systems that combine several order systems.

Our hospitals are under [health system] now. They own them. We do not. Under [health system] there is a group called Sponsor Liaison Council. Each of the provinces have, I think, two representatives on that Council. That is by their corporation so we have that connection into [health system].

Congregational systems regard congregations as the central organizing force for justice and charity work. Ministries such as a church food pantry may begin as an individual or corporate call for service that are recognized and supported by congregations. These ministries often incorporate as an independent nonprofit. Nonprofits were sponsored either by individual congregations or groups of congregations, turning to these congregations for all forms of support. Mainline Protestants, some African American churches, and Quakers, and some Evangelicals fell into the congregational system. The Quaker retirement community is one example of a congregational system FBO. In other cases, an FBO is supported by several congregations, either a formal interfaith organization or a loosely connected set of congregations.

GEDCO was founded by three Mainline Protestant churches and one Catholic church, which appoint board members, solicit volunteers, funding and in-kind donations and other forms of support. One key congregation houses some of GEDCO's facilities. Over the years, other congregations and some secular organizations have joined the organization. GEDCO communicates regularly with all of its congregations, both asking for help and sharing information. In turn, member congregations have provided significant funding, volunteer labor and other supports to the organization.

FBOs operating from congregational systems would need to maintain strong connections to individual congregations, sometimes expanding to other congregations if they felt they needed additional resources or guidance.

Network systems transcend congregations, drawing together people with a similar faith-based vision to carry forward the work based on either social networks of the founders or institutional/virtual networks of people with a similar vision. These organizations are most likely to hire staff or use volunteers exclusively from people who share the same faith and ground programming in that faith. While the only network system organizations in this study were Evangelical Christian nonprofits, we recognize that other faiths also use network organizational strategies.

For network organizations, stewardship comes from the network of supporters, which often changes over time. One network based FBO started out relying on people from several key congregations, but now has a wide virtual network of individual supporters that share the same faith. These supporters volunteer, contribute to fundraising campaigns, and provide in-kind materials for the organization. Board members come from the founder's friends who also share her beliefs.

Since network organizations clearly combine faith with works, they often are open to new ideas that come with supporters, known in Evangelical circles as divine intervention. For example, one community based ministry that draws support from a wide array of individuals reported:

A lady that came in and wanted to give us a sewing machine. And we said well nobody in the neighborhood knows how to use it. What we really want is you. So, that started her with two or three of her neighbors coming in with sewing machines and having a sewing class every other week. You use the talents and the gifts of the people that God sends you.

For network organizations, the key to maintaining connections lies in clearly articulating the faith orientation and faith-based mission in motivating every aspect of the organizations work for the FBO and using word of mouth and virtual networking techniques to draw people and resources to the organization.

While each system can learn from each other, strategies would need to be adapted to fit the practical theology of a particular religion.

Formal and Informal Connections

Thriving faith-based organizations rely on both formal and informal connections to maintain relationships with their faith community. These relationships generate **social capital, networks among people or organizations based on reciprocal, enforceable trust that can lead to resources like volunteers, funding, guidance or in-kind supports**. Formal and informal connections are equally important.

Formal connections include:

- Requirements that sponsoring faith communities appoint a portion of board members
- For Institutional system organizations, FBOs often have formal contracts with the centralized institutionalized systems
- Requirements that the sponsoring faith community approve or participate in changes to by-laws or mission statement
- Requirements that FBOs regularly report to their sponsoring faith community
- Requirements that faith community members participate in or approve key staff hires like executive directors
- Membership in umbrella organizations associated with that faith like Catholic Healthcare Association, the national organization for Jewish Community Centers, Friends Services for the Aging or Habitat International
- Where faith communities own or control land or buildings used by the FBO, requirements that the faith community approve proposals to expand, move or sell property.
- Requirements that key staff (usually the executive director) belong to or understand the founding faith
- In Evangelical organizations or some network organizations, FBOs have statements of faith that all employees have to sign or affirm they agree with. We did not find statements of faith in congregational or institutional systems organizations, but sometimes agency policies like not paying for birth control or abortion and not providing counseling on certain topics came from faith community faith statements.

Informal connections were often more important than formal connections to maintain connections to the sponsoring faith community. For example, one congregation formally supported several FBOs offering different services. In all cases, the congregation appointed board members to the organization. Several of the organizations had strong, informal relationships with the congregation – congregation members volunteered at the organization, attended events, and sometimes used services. These organizations had no trouble garnering board appointments, funds, volunteers and other resources from the congregation. Another organization's only contact with the congregation was an annual fundraising appeal. It had trouble finding board appointees and complained constantly that its founding faith community did not support it. FBOs would do well to cultivate both formal and informal connections to their founding communities.

Informal connections are particularly important for executive directors and development directors. One interfaith organization deliberately hired Jewish executive directors twice because they sought funding from a Jewish family foundation. The executive directors chosen had informal connections to that foundation and other family foundations, successfully raising funds. Another organization deliberately hired someone with strong networks in the founding faith community after several unsuccessful development directors. This individual has been much more successful in garnering support for the organization.

Strategies to Maintain Stewardship Connections

- Clarify or create formal interactions between faith community and FBO like regular reporting mechanisms and opportunities for faith community members to become involved in the organization.
- Identify the type of faith community system (Institutional, congregational, or network) and strengthen ties to the key institutions or networks that best use the faith community's resources.
- Work with the founding faith community to clarify the role of the founding faith tradition in agency activities and develop mechanisms so that the faith community can play a role in maintaining those traditions
- If a staff or board members' theological commitment is important for an organization, this can be a primary expectation during hiring decisions. Training in religiously based commitments can also be provided during staff orientation, trainings, or in-service curriculums. Members of the founding faith community can also be engaged in this process.
- Revisit mission statement from time to time in order to assess their current organizational activities in light of the founding or affiliated faith communities' practical theological commitments. Leaders should be aware of their organizational structure or form and its relationship to the founding religion's typical system (institutionalized, congregational, or network). In addition, leaders should pay attention to the existing and changing ways that their founding faith communities live out their faith through its active charity work and ministries.)
- If your organization is less similar in religious background or if this background no longer is similar to the founding community or the current faith affiliation, it may be important to consider identifying, confirming, or clarifying the organization's underlying and theologically-driven motives. A discussion of whether and how such commitments are valued and whether they are integrated into the organizations' program areas and ways of doing things can be a helpful process.
- Create or strengthen strong informal networks with faith community members.
- Join or become active in umbrella organizations affiliated with the faith community.

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.

