

Strategies to Address Conflicts between Faith Communities and Faith Based Organizations



Every nonprofit and its supporting community experiences tensions on a regular basis. These tensions can be a healthy part of organizational growth or a natural aspect of the relationship between the founding faith community and a nonprofit. However, when tensions are not addressed appropriately, they can erupt into conflicts between the faith community and the nonprofit. Some problems may be caused by the behaviors of key nonprofit or faith community leaders, or personality conflicts that can be solved either through personnel changes, better communication, or mediation.

In general, we found that conflicts between faith communities and FBOs involved concerns regarding whether or not the FBO reflected the faith and common practices of the religious community that supported it, known as *Practical Theology* and *Religious Culture*. However, since faith communities regularly debate and change their practical theology and culture, determining the nature of the problem and solutions was seldom easy. Conflicts could cause tangible problems for faith communities and FBOs, leading to loss of resources for organizations and sometimes damaging the faith community's reputation.

These conflicts fell into three categories: **1)** disconnects between faith community expectations and nonprofit behavior, **2)** FBO's unmet expectations of their founding faith community, and **3)** internal issues for organizations like administrative, service provision issues, financial issues, or personnel issues that were reported back to the faith community. Using examples from our research, this pamphlet explores each of these kinds of conflicts, offering suggestions to address them. Given that practical theology for religions varied, solutions that work in one religion may not work for all. We highlight both points of differences among religions and common strategies that work for all of them.

Conflicts Related to Faith Community Expectations

The most common conflicts, often those that loomed largest and lasted many years, involved concerns among members of the faith community that a nonprofit connected with that faith did not reflect the values or behaviors of its faith community. In many cases, these conflicts reflected an ongoing debate **within** the faith community regarding beliefs or practices. These internal debates could represent divisions within the faith community or faith community tensions over rapidly changing beliefs. Sometimes a vocal minority raised issues that were not a concern for most in the faith community. However, in a few cases, FBO behaviors caused concern for many faith community members or the religious hierarchy. In these cases, faith communities either tried to remedy concerns or distanced themselves from the FBO. The following case studies may help faith communities and FBOs identify the type of conflict and work toward resolution.

This resource is designed for faith based organization (FBO) staff, board members, and faith community clergy, lay leaders and future lay leaders to help understand the causes of conflicts between faith communities and their organizations, as well as positive strategies to resolve them.

We outline key findings about how FBOs understand and respond to the expectations of their faith community and use that information to suggest strategies for strengthening connections with the faith community so that both groups can thrive.

Perceptions that FBOs did not reflect practical theology or religious culture: These issues could reflect one of two concerns: 1) ways that the FBO presented itself that some parts of the faith community felt were contrary to their religious beliefs or practices and 2) concerns that the organization was becoming secular, or not religious enough.

❖ **Public Presentation Issues**

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is often considered the public face of the Religious Society of Friends in the U.S., yet many Quakers have complained since the 1970s that the organization is not Quaker enough. Concerns revolve around several issues: 1) that agency practices do not reflect Friends processes, 2) that Quakers do not have sufficient avenues to participate in guiding the organization or suggesting programs, and 3) the fact that fewer Friends are employed by the organization and it no longer offers regular volunteer opportunities for Quakers. While Friends continue to support the organization and its governing board includes many Quakers, the bulk of its funding no longer comes from Quakers. After several years of contentious conversations at AFSC presentations at Quaker gatherings, the organization began doing media-heavy, staff dominated presentations. This quelled open conflict, but audiences dwindled and the practice increased comments that AFSC was not a Quaker organization. Recently, these media presentations have been combined with informal conversations by key staffers who are Quaker with Friends at Quaker gatherings and other venues. This new practice has led to more positive feelings toward the organization in some Quaker circles.

A faith community divided regarding whether the organization reflects its values is typical of the majority of conflicts. As with the AFSC, the conflict does not focus on the stated mission of the organization, but on practices that are at odds with its practical theology. Quaker culture stresses community participation in decision making at all levels, transparency, and non-violence. The increasingly staff driven direction of the organization, media-heavy presentations, and tone of some of its programs struck some Friends as contrary to their practices. As an increasing number of non-Quaker staff brought communications styles that fostered debate or did not allow for everyone's voice to be heard, Friends felt that their testimonies of non-violence and decision making processes were violated. Finally, the organization had been an avenue for Quakers to put their faith into action, and new personnel and volunteer policies made this more difficult, even though these policies reflected Quaker values and discernment.

This is an ongoing conflict, although more recent efforts to communicate informally with Friends have led toward some resolution. It highlights several issues to which FBOs and faith communities must pay attention: 1) Do the organization's practices reflect the religion's current practices and culture? 2) Do members of the religious community have avenues to respond to organization activities or participate in them that are in keeping with the values and practices of that religion? 3) How does the organization communicate with its faith community members?

A thriving crisis pregnancy center has several locations and is supported by a network of individuals that share its mission to encourage women experiencing "at risk" pregnancies to keep their babies through counseling and state of the art health services. While enjoying widespread support from evangelicals it has experienced tensions with its community. The director reported:

There were some denominations that didn't want to get involved with us because other denominations were involved with us and I think they felt like we were proselytizing

someone away from a certain church and we did have some churches that thought that we would put volunteers from their denomination, with a client that said she was from that denomination and we had to explain that's also not what we are willing to do, because we believe whoever they're going to see is who God has set for them. ...some churches have wanted us to ...make a political statement.. we had to explain that we were not a political organization and we weren't going to make a statement against someone or something.

This example illustrates two problems: 1) mismatched expectations regarding the goals of an organization and 2) expectations that an organization will play a more active role in advocacy than it is willing to do. Evangelical organizations all share a goal to use their faith in service provision, but not all evangelical organizations' primary goal is to proselytize. This organization has a policy that it will share faith with clients if asked, but counseling focuses on preventing abortion rather than encouraging the mother to join an evangelical congregation. Over time, the organization resolved this conflict by relying less on individual congregations for support, instead drawing on virtual and word of mouth networks. The organization also spent much time explaining its methods and policies to its potential supporters.

Proselytizing is a major issue for many FBOs and their faith communities, but most of the other religious groups in the study felt that their nonprofits should not proselytize. To avoid conflict, many FBOs shared this policy with staff and volunteers.

FBOs need to be careful regarding political statements both because of the diversity within their faith communities and due to IRS regulations limiting political advocacy by nonprofits providing a service. Pro-life/Pro-choice and sexual orientation issues draw the most conflict within religious groups, for example several Catholic organizations commented that they drew ire both from pro-life and pro-choice Catholics. The solution for most organizations involves explaining a policy not to make political statements or referring members to the advocacy organizations for that religion.

❖ **Secularization reflecting wider community values at odds with the founding faith:** This issue was a particular challenge for organizations receiving federal funds or where most of the people they served did not come from the faith community.

A large Jewish senior services organization provides highly respected services to the elderly in its community, primarily using government funds. The organization's practices stem from an interpretation of the Tikun Olam, (to heal the world) as helping everyone in the community and its programming reflects other Jewish values. The agency is an active member of its local Jewish Federation, the planning and fundraising institution for this community. However, it has had ongoing conflicts with its Federation and some community members because its programs are not targeted primarily toward the Jewish elderly. While this complaint continues, ongoing communications between board leadership and the federation has lessened the tensions.

Many FBOs serving the general public (Catholic Charities, other large social service organizations and hospitals) face similar complaints. Common strategies include regular communications and developing materials for the faith community that clearly explain the faith principles for apparently secular services.

In schools that served people outside of their religion, business principles may conflict with religious ideals. Efforts to attract students in a competitive market were reflected in aspects of the curriculum meant to attract more students from the broader population. For example, one

Quaker leader commented: *“it is a good school and there are some good Quakers working there and some Quakerly sorts of stuff. ... but it just isn't us and we are somewhat uneasy with that. Why are we putting our energies into educating the wealthy?”*

In most schools, issues focused on whether or not faith community members and poorer students could afford to attend, what program expenses were necessary to compete with upper class private schools. Solutions tended to include more scholarships, but issues regarding the upper class nature of these schools were seldom resolved.

Faith Community Theological Debates Fought Out in the Context of Organizations:

Quite frequently, FBOs become the focus for theological debates within the faith community. The earlier example of whether the Jewish senior services agency is Jewish enough may reflect a theological debate - some Jews interpret Tikun Olam as healing the Jewish world, others take it as a universal command. Catholic hospitals regularly hear concerns from Catholics that they were promoting abortion if they participated in some national breast and cervical cancer fundraising initiatives while simultaneously regularly defending policies in keeping with the Church's pro-life stand.

The Baltimore Jewish Community Center (JCC) spent over 30 years and three contentious debates between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox portions of the Jewish community before the Federation gave permission to open the facility primarily serving the non-Orthodox community on Saturday afternoons, the Jewish Sabbath. The facility in the Orthodox neighborhood has a number of special practices designed to fit the beliefs of the Orthodox and both facilities serve Kosher food. The Orthodox felt strongly that opening the organization on Saturday would violate Jewish law while other Jews felt that having the JCC available, offering Jewish cultural programming and a Jewish environment to relax in, promoted their ability to practice their faith. Jewish Federation and JCC leaders reported using research, planning studies and ongoing discussions with various parts of the community to attempt to resolve this issue over the years. People involved all commented that earlier attempts in 1978 and 1997 failed because lengthy public comment periods gave vocal Orthodox community leaders time to rally public outcry from their constituents. The new policy ultimately passed in 2009 with limited public protests because deliberations were kept private until close to the final vote and JCC and Federation leaders made every effort to discuss their decision with Orthodox leaders.

In all of these cases, the organization is caught in larger debates within a diverse faith community and must decide for itself how it fits the religious culture and practical theology of its founding faith. Organizations that successfully navigate these challenges worked closely with their board and faith community leaders to identify the faith base for their policies and communicated regularly with various constituencies to address concerns. Strategic communications tactics like the Baltimore Jewish community's limited period for public comment were also regularly used. While these organizations tried to address concerns of diverse constituencies within the faith community, leaders also understood that they would not please everyone, and met community concerns with good will and good humor.

FBO Unmet Expectations

Conflicts involving FBO unmet expectations usually revolved around resources - FBOs felt that faith communities should be providing more or more qualified board members, more funds and volunteers, and more general support for the organization. For example, the director of a mainline Protestant interfaith organization complained that board members were assigned

haphazardly and did little to promote the organization in their congregations. Her first step in taking over the organization was to talk with the pastor of each participating congregation in an effort to explain the organization's needs and garner the kind of support she wanted. Other FBO leaders reached out to new congregations in an effort to find more resources. Still others sought ways to more directly involve faith community members in the organization through creating volunteer opportunities, soliciting in-kind donations, or sharing information in person with faith communities.

FBOs complaining of limited support from their faith communities often had poor communications with their founding religious bodies or lacked a champion in key congregations, diocese, or Federation. In some cases, simply improving communications solved problems. In other cases, problems stemmed from faith community concerns that the organization did not reflect its practical theology or was poorly managed. Resources were withheld because of lack of confidence in FBO style or operations. These conflicts were not fixed unless underlying concerns were addressed.

Catholic and Jewish FBOs that were part of larger systems sometimes complained that they could not get the resources for their projects or some FBOs were favored over others. For example, a leader in a Catholic health system that carefully evaluates and plans for new initiatives commented:

A local health ministry gets so caught up in its need. ...whether it is a program or a community effort or building they are so emotionally involved that they want it now. Because we are all involved in [health system] they have to have an assurance that they have to have the finances when it is needed by an institution. Maybe some of those capital needs have to be scheduled. We can't require [health system] to produce locally for ten institutions \$100M all in one month.

The health system leader commented that these problems no longer cause tensions as local hospitals have become more familiar with the system's planning and authorization procedure.

Sometimes, FBO unmet expectations stemmed from differences in denominational or racial/ethnic religious practice. For example, an African American pastor in a mainline Protestant religion tried unsuccessfully to get the local conference to become the fiscal sponsor for government funded programs. The participating congregations chose not to incorporate a separate nonprofit as is standard Mainline Protestant practice because they wanted more direct control over the programs. All of the participating congregations were African American congregations within a racially diverse conference, and they were following the common practice of African American churches where congregations have direct control over their service programs. This conflict remained unresolved, with the key pastor labeling the problem as "classism" because the conference expressed that congregations should have the funds to support their own programs without government aid.

FBO Internal Issues that Concern Faith Communities

While almost all conflicts between FBOs and their founding faiths on some level reflect concerns that the nonprofit reflects faith community values, some conflicts stem primarily from concerns over the day to day management, fiscal policy and personnel policies of the FBO. Concerns could be due to actual issues within an organization or lack of understanding of agency common practices among faith community members. In these cases, problems were not resolved unless the offending practice was either changed or sufficiently explained to the faith community.

While sometimes these concerns resolved quickly, they could lead to the organization losing funding or formal support from its founding faith community. Several related issues caused concerns:

- ❖ **Authentically reflect the founding faith while having expertise to run an organization:** While faith community leaders expected FBOs to reflect their faith, they quickly became concerned when organizations could not write successful grants to raise funds, maintain their books, or perform basic administrative functions.

One Quaker senior services organization rapidly lost support because its executive directors failed in several funding initiatives, some fiscal practices raised concerns, and it did not provide clear financial reports. Some faith community members called for leadership changes, but had no authority to make personnel changes in the organization and Meeting-appointed board members seemed unwilling to openly propose firing the current executive director. Instead, the faith community refused to provide seed funding for projects, gradually stopped appointing board members, and tried unsuccessfully to revoke its relationship to the organization. Lacking authority to make meaningful change within the organization, the faith community instead engaged in a series of internal processes to discuss concerns, but with little communication or collaboration with the FBO. At the same time, the FBO sought more freedom to appoint its board members, also with limited success and little effective communication with the faith community. At the end of the study, some key underlying issues had been addressed but concerns generally continued.

In other cases, lack of expertise comes from the faith community. Quite often, FBOs expressed concerns that sponsoring faith communities would appoint board members who did not understand their role or did not have the expertise in fundraising, governance or other necessary skills. Other times, people with expertise in business or faith communities raised concerns because they did not understand nonprofit practice.

- ❖ **Using business or secular management or finance models contrary to faith community values or expectations:** This issue has become increasingly prevalent as FBOs follow other nonprofits in adopting business models. We saw many examples:

A management consultant tries to tell a bishop what to say in a speech at a fundraising event for a Catholic organization, something that is simply not done in the Catholic Church. The bishop refuses to give the speech and the agency finds someone else.

A fundraiser in an FBO sponsored by a faith community where most members are of modest means designs a fundraising letter with suggested amounts of 1,000, 500, 250, 100, and other, based on current large organization fundraising events. Faith community members laugh when they see the letter and throw it away. Another FBO successfully raises funds through a lavish gala, but few contributors come from the faith community and it gradually loses touch with its founding community.

An African American FBO loses its original sponsoring church because its pastor does not want to take federal funds. Other churches step in to take over sponsorship of the organization.

In an effort to meet perceptions that the Bush administration faith based initiative expects FBOs to reach out to congregations, a non-Jewish employee at a Jewish organization tries to organize presentations at local synagogues. However, in the Jewish system, outreach is generally

handled through the Federation to the community at large, not congregations. Synagogue staff are puzzled by the initiative and it does not succeed.

A Quaker organization uses a venture capital partnership to raise funds for new initiatives. This is considered not good business practices and unethical by many Quakers, raising concern that the partner was using Friends reputation for honesty to cover fraudulent financial dealings.

Each of these examples illustrates practices that are at odds with the culture or theology of the faith community or key leaders. In some cases, problems are resolved by changing practices to better fit community values or finding others who are in sympathy with agency goals. The most successful managers and fundraisers at FBOs commented that they combined technical expertise for their jobs, deep understanding of the founding faith and culture, and strong networks in the community.

❖ **Finance, governance and transparency issues:** These problems occurred less often in the organizations in this study, but when they did arise, caused great concern. The Quaker senior services example above shows how seriously faith communities take this issue.

In many cases, concerns arose from lack of transparency rather than actual governance or fiscal malfeasance. For example, one African American pastor insisted that the quasi-independent nonprofits under the care of his church provide details on their trusts and assets, a request that led to some conflict with the organizations because it had not been done in the past.

Sometimes governance conflicts come from FBO practices that differ from that of the founding faith community. For example, a highly regarded housing organization was founded by someone who had left the Jesuit order and several Catholic friends. For a period of time, the organization became part of the local Catholic Charities, enjoying the benefits and personnel structures of the larger organization. However, it eventually broke with Catholic Charities over control issues, with a leader commenting: *“So we went from being an organization able to do everything you wanted to being more accountable to the folks downtown. ...the folks at [FBO] were starting to feel like they couldn’t move; that they were strangled.”*

❖ **Personnel issues that get back to the faith community:** In most cases, personnel problems raised concern for the faith community either when either a faith community member employed by the agency complains or employee behaviors potentially damage the faith community. While we heard several incidents of faith community member complaints, usually faith communities had mixed views of the situation and it seldom became a major problem.

Poor hires in key positions caused the most problems. For example, one Quaker organization hired an executive director from a denomination with a more authoritarian leadership style than Friends. Many employees quit and he quickly found himself at odds with the board. He left and the organization hired someone from the founding faith to replace him.

In other cases, employees can cause embarrassment for the faith community or concern to key funders. For example, one employee eventually was let go after leading a series of sit-ins at city hall to change discriminatory practices. While the organization and some faith community members supported the cause, government officials threatened to stop grants to the organization.

Strategies That Address Conflicts

- ❖ **Since many conflicts stem from concerns over practical theology, both FBO and faith community leaders need to clearly understand and articulate the ways that organization mission and practices reflect the founding faith.** Mission statements and “founding principles” should be documents that get reviewed for alignment with community norms in a natural board cycle.
- ❖ **FBO and faith community leaders also need to understand and respect the diversity of beliefs within the faith community in order to address concerns arising from internal theological debates.**
- ❖ **Successful FBO leaders and key staff are well versed in the practical theology and religious culture of the sponsoring faith community as well as technically qualified for their jobs.** Board and faith community leaders can prevent many potential problems through careful consideration of both factors in hiring decisions as well as orientations for all staff and volunteers.
- ❖ **Spiritual, as well as financial transparency may be achieved through regular, personal communications between FBO and faith community on multiple levels.**
- ❖ **Developing strong networks between faith communities and FBOs at leadership and informal levels is the first step in developing trust and communication necessary to avoid or address conflicts.**

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 concerned about conflict may also be especially interested in companion strategies documents on *Survival of Organizations*, *Stewardship of Connections*, *Leadership Transitions*, and *Appointing Board Members*. Further readings on the issue of conflict 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.

