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Congregations as Social Service Providers: Services, Capacity, Culture, and Organizational Behavior

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Abstract

Social welfare is traditionally discussed as a mixture of public, private, communal, and familial enterprise. Indeed, most textbooks and programs focus on the changing balance between these four circles of care. In the United States, a fifth and recently prominent circle of care exists and plays a major role, namely congregation-based social service provision. In this article, we first explain why faith-based care is so paramount in the United States, including a short discussion about the political developments in faith-based efforts. We then show the scope of congregational involvement in social service provision based on a large study of congregations. The rest of the article is dedicated to key administrative challenges regarding this mode of social service provision with a focus on their capacity, cultural characteristics, and organizational behavior. The latter topic is divided between start-up of new projects by congregations and issues related to running social programs in congregational settings. We conclude with a summary and discussion about the place of congregations as social service providers in the American welfare arena.

Keywords

Congregations, faith-based social services, administrative challenges, alternative social services delivery, welfare-mix

Comments

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Congregations as Social Service Providers: Services, Capacity, Culture, and Organizational Behavior

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SUMMARY. Social welfare is traditionally discussed as a mixture of public, private, communal, and familial enterprise. Indeed, most textbooks and programs focus on the changing balance between these four circles of care. In the United States, a fifth and recently prominent circle of care exists and plays a major role, namely congregation-based social service provision. In this article, we first explain why faith-based care is so paramount in the United States, including a short discussion about the political developments in faith-based efforts. We then show the scope of congregational involvement in social service provision based on a large

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INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the 21st century, many welfare states are discussing the need to shift the balance in their welfare programs. Moving from a massive reliance on the public sector, these states are increasingly investigating the role of three other players: the private sector (both employers and private providers), the local community, and the family (Ascoli & Ranci, 2002). In the past quarter century, almost all Western democracies are shifting their welfare costs from the government to other sectors, a process known as devolution (Lipsky & Smith, 1989-90). The United States clearly led the way toward devolution. Starting with smallest percentage of GDP publicly allocated for welfare services, under the guise of the "new federalism," the American government shifted welfare provision responsibility to the states and from them to cities and counties (Conlan, 1998). Yet, today what is most unique about the American welfare state is the push to use faith-based social providers and especially local religious congregations (Cnaan et al., 2002; Hodgkinson, Weitzman, Kirsch, Noga, & Gorski, 1993).

To understand the role of religious groups in social service provision, a few facts should be clarified. First, the United States may justly lay claim to be the most religious of all modern democracies. According to the World Value Survey, conducted from 1990 to 1993, more people in the United States (82%) defined themselves as religious than did those in any other country (*The Economist*, 1995). In a 1993 CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll, 71 percent of Americans reported membership in a church or synagogue, and 41 percent reported atten-

dance at a church or synagogue in the seven days prior to the poll (McAneny & Saad, 1993). A more recent study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2001) found that Americans show high rates of religious observance. Six out of ten Americans attend religious services (not including weddings and funerals) at least once a month, while 43 percent attend at least weekly. Overall, slightly less than half the public (46%) said they attended church in the previous seven days. Cnaan, Gelles, and Sinha (2002) found that even teens in the United States report high religiosity, with 86 percent claiming that religion is important in their lives, 67 percent report attending worship services at least monthly, and 41 percent report membership in a faith-based youth group.

Second, in addition to congregations, America has the widest range of active religions and denominations. It is estimated that there are 2,000 religions and denominations active in the United States. However, this religious presence is often overlooked when discussing the contributions of community organizations.

Community organizations most often refer to neighborhood associations, human service organizations, branches of city-wide groups, civic associations, small businesses, tenants' associations, ecological preservation groups, police precincts, city units (those stationed in the neighborhood and those only serving the neighborhood), libraries, community centers, public schools, private schools, and gangs, each representing certain interests. It is surprising that we neglect to include the most prevalent and longstanding community institution, namely local religious congregations. Other religious groups in the community, including religious schools (Catholic and many others), faith-based social groups, para-church groups, Bible reading/study groups, and house churches contribute to the presence of faith-based groups in the community. In communities that have witnessed a decline or disappearance of employers and community organizations over the late twentieth century, faith groups that have remained in the community are crucial (Fabricant & Fisher, 2002).

In his in-depth study of the institutional ecology of four Los Angeles neighborhoods, John Orr (1998) discovered that there were "an average of 35 religious congregations and 12.5 religiously-affiliated nonprofit corporations per square mile, far more than the number of gasoline stations, liquor stores, and supermarkets combined" (p. 3). Similarly, in our study of West Philadelphia, we found 433 places of worship in an area of 13 square miles, approximately the same ratio of congregations to square mile found by Orr in Los Angeles (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002). Botchwey (2003) studied a small segment of Philadelphia's most blighted neighborhood. In an area of seven contiguous census tracts (1.3 square miles and 400 households), she found 62 active organizations. Of these 62 organizations, only 23 percent (14) were non-faith-based.

The remaining organizations were either congregations (41, or 66%) or faith-based organizations (7, or 11%). In other words, not only are Americans very religious, but religious organizations in the United States are the most prevalent community institution.

Given the preponderance of congregational involvement and sheer volume of congregations in America (estimates range from 250,000 to 400,000), their geographical distribution, and the devolutionary trends in this society, it is clear that faith-based groups, especially congregations, will be harnessed to provide social services (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002; Smith & Sosin, 2001). Signs of this movement are visible. After Charitable Choice legislation passed in 1996, making it more possible for faith-based groups to apply for public funding to provide certain services, the legislation was extended twice; once to include Community Services Block Grants (1988) and once to include drug abuse treatment programs (2000). In 2001, President Bush established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, and in late 2002, he signed an executive order barring all federal agencies from discriminating against religious organizations when awarding social service money.

Congregations and other faith-based organizations are encouraged to move into the field of social welfare provision when resources are cut and needs are rising. Consequently, religiously affiliated agencies are experiencing new obligations as they are pressured to compensate for declines in public spending. For example, clients and other constituencies are urging some faith-based agencies to increase their material assistance effort as income maintenance support declines (Smith & Sosin, 2001).

Whether and to what extent congregations can increase their service provision remains at large in the debate. The unique administrative and managerial characteristics of congregations may well be part of their strength, while at the same time limit their capacity. Harris (1995) contended that congregations are a unique subset of voluntary associations with a few special characteristics. We take this argument one step further, asserting that congregations are so distinct that they should be singularly defined and studied.

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of congregations as social service providers in America and review their organizational characteristics. We deal with congregations as unique social service providers as opposed to other types of nonprofits or public service providers. We focus here on the formal social service provided by congregations ranging from after school programs to health clinics and from summer camps to homeless shelters. These services significantly complement and reduce the need for public social services. In this era of devolution and increased reliance on faith-based organizations, it is essential for the social service administration community to know how to collaborate with, and even within, faith-based social services providers.

This study will enable social service administrators to work better with faith-based social service providers of all types.

In this paper, after describing the methods for our study, we provide the reader with information of services provided by congregations, followed by an analysis of their capacity as social service providers. We continue by discussing the organizational culture of congregations as social service providers, followed by two sections about organizational behavior—starting up programs and maintaining social programs. We conclude with a discussion of the congregations as a social service agency. We should note at the outset that congregations are extremely heterogeneous and diverse. While we treat them as a single entity here, we recognize the risk of overgeneralization and overlooking variation and regional and theological differences.

METHODS

Background and Sampling

Data collection took place from 1998 to 2001. It was difficult to identify all congregations in Philadelphia, as there is no complete accurate list with all or even most of the city's religious congregations; neither is there an agreement on how to define a congregation (Cnaan et al., 2002). After almost three years of study, we estimate the number of congregations in Philadelphia to be approximately 2,119. To develop a working list of congregations, we merged two data files: the City of Philadelphia Property Tax list and the Yellow Pages list of congregations. In order to identify unlisted congregations, we applied three methods. First, we requested lists from every denomination and interfaith organization in the region. We received fifteen different lists. We merged these with our master file manually since congregations often use various names and may give more than one address or list a clergy residence. Second, in every interview, we asked clergy members or key-informants to identify and provide contact information for any congregations with which they collaborate. Given that the interviewers were paid per completed interview, they had an incentive to identify new congregations and add them to the master list. We also enlisted our advisory board, composed of religious leaders throughout the city, to review the list and supply information about missing congregations. Finally, our research interviewers canvassed neighborhoods block-by-block to identify possibly unlisted storefront churches and other congregations not on our master file. In the process we discovered many congregations, especially those of ethnic minority, that were unlisted. These combined approaches brought us closer to a complete master list. Our list now consists of

2,119 distinct congregations. Of this list, we interviewed 1,392 congregations (66%).

Procedures

Trained research assistants or the authors contacted congregations to solicit their participation. All interviewers received both a lengthy orientation and weekly group in-service training about the history and overview of the study, its benefit to the congregations and broader community, ways to use and disseminate data, and an introduction to the survey instruments. Each interviewer was given a training manual with the above information and specifications and clarification for the survey instruments. Weekly in-service meetings were held to discuss problems and insure inter-rater reliability. Mock interviews were held monthly and a trained data entry person detected mistakes and inconsistencies in the data.

When a congregation agreed to an interview, the interviewer went and engaged the senior clergy or his/her representative in a face-to-face interview. On average, interviews lasted three or more hours. At times the interview included a group of people in the congregation such as the clergy, lay leaders, and an administrator. Given that many questions were written for experienced interviewers, interviews were conducted face-to-face in the congregational setting. No telephone or written responses were accepted.

Instrumentation

In carrying out this study, we used a comprehensive range of research instruments. The first instrument is the *Core Questionnaire*. The Core Questionnaire is a ten-page instrument designed to elicit information regarding the history and background of the congregation. The key areas covered in this instrument are: the congregation's religious affiliation, theological and political orientation, history, membership, financial affairs and budget, governance, future plans, physical layout, and relationships with the local community and other institutions that are active in the area.

The second part of the interview is the *Inventory of Programs*. It was compiled after reviewing numerous reports and interviewing experts in congregational social services. The instrument ascertained information about the congregation's areas of social service involvement (that is, non-religious services to society). The interviewer covered 215 areas of possible social and community involvement. For each possible area of social service, it was assessed if the service is provided at all, formally or informally, by the congregation or by someone else, on the congregational properties or elsewhere, and if it is the

congregation's program or supports another organizations' program. The interview focused on the past year (past 12 months) to include annual and seasonal programs such as summer camp, and to assure similar coverage for all congregations regardless of the time of year in which the interview took place. This inventory of social programs served as a means to help interviewees cover all their social programs and involvement.

The third part of the interview is the *Specific Program Form*. This instrument was used to gather information about the most important and resource-laden social service programs provided by the congregation, up to a maximum of five programs. The interviewee was asked detailed questions about a program's history, ownership, staffing, beneficiaries, frequency, and cost. To determine a program's overall cost, seven items were used to compile a replacement value (value of space used for the program; clergy, staff and volunteer hours; cash support; in kind support; and utilities costs). Due to the length of interviewing time, congregations with more than five social programs were asked to choose only the five "most representative of their work," and to tell us briefly about other services or programs provided.

RESULTS

What Services Do Congregations Provide?

Congregations are highly involved in social service provision (Cnaan & Boddie, 2001). Almost nine of every ten congregations, regardless of size and ethnic composition, are engaged in at least one social service provision. Often the service is quite modest—meeting the need of some twenty community residents in programs such as after school recreational programs and food pantries. A host of other local studies show similar findings (cf. Ammerman, 2001; Billingsley, 1999; DiPietro & Behr, 2002; Grettenberger & Hovmand, 1997; Hill, 1998; Hodgkinson et al., 1993; Jackson, Schweitzer, Blake, & Cato, 1997; Printz, 1998; Silverman, 2000) with one often-quoted exception (Chaves, 1999).

Our social service inventory of 215 possible congregation services included only those programs that went beyond solely religious services such as prayer meetings or worship. It included programs that were administered formally by the congregation, occurred on its property, or with help from outside the congregation. Of the 215 services, each and every program was offered by at least a few congregations. While we are sure that the tapestry of congregation-based services is a rich and diverse one, it also deserves further study.

The most commonly served groups were children and youth, the elderly, people who are homeless, and people who are poor. Almost half the congregations reportedly offer food pantries, and more than a third of the congregations offer summer day camps, recreational programs for teens, and clothing closets. About a quarter of the congregations offer music performances, soup kitchens, and educational tutoring. Other commonly offered programs included: international relief and sick/homebound visitation (22% each), prison ministry, programs for gang members, and choral groups (21% each), and after school care and support for neighborhood associations (20% each).

On average, we found that each congregation provides at least 2.5 distinct programs. These programs served some combination of members and non-members. On average, each congregation sponsored programs that served 39 members of the congregation and 63 community residents who are not members of the congregation. In other words, congregations tend to serve others more than their own members at a ratio of two to three. This ratio shows congregations serving others rather than existing as “exclusive clubs.”

On average, 16 members of each congregation (this figure includes paid staff and volunteers) are involved in social service delivery, and they are joined by nine volunteers who are not members of the congregation. This ability to recruit a large volume of volunteers, even from among non-members, sets congregations apart from many social service organizations and highlights one of their strongest advantages over traditional social services providers.

Almost all congregations (1192, or 85.6%) informed us that they hold worship or prayer services in collaboration with other religious groups. A large percentage of congregations collaborated with other faith-based organizations to develop and deliver community service programs (870, or 62.5%). Somewhat surprisingly, more than half of the congregations (781, or 56.2%) reported collaborating with secular organizations for the purpose of delivering a service or running a program. The collaborating organizations may be government agencies, local universities, neighborhood associations or community organizations. The purposes of the collaborations often include sharing space, sharing financial resources, or sharing staff and supplies. Interestingly, congregations often elect to worship with others, but also willingly cooperate to help people in need.

What is the value of social labor contributed by congregation volunteers, clergy, and staff? The answer can be provided by estimating the replacement value of the social services provided by the congregations on their properties, using their own financial resources and volunteers. By replacement value we do not mean the amount it costs for a congregation to run their programs in terms of dollars. What we mean is the amount it would cost others to provide the same services or programs at the level stipulated if they did not have con-

gregational property and member volunteers at their disposal. To illustrate, if a congregation pays a mortgage for a building in which a social program is held, the value of the space is a congregational contribution, which in real terms, has a cost and a financial value. Similarly, if a clergy member invests time in a social program, his or her salary should be recognized as paid by the congregation which enables him or her to spend time providing community-oriented services.

The monthly replacement value of an average Philadelphia congregation is estimated at \$9,821.06. We converted the monthly values into annual values (multiplying the sum of \$9,821.06 by 12 months), and thereby obtained an annual replacement value of \$117,852.72. Given that our work so far shows that there are 2,119 congregations in Philadelphia, and assuming (as we do) that our sample of 1,392 congregations is highly representative of the city's congregations, we assess the annual replacement value of the entire body of congregations in Philadelphia at \$249,729,914. In other words, congregations' annual contribution to Philadelphia's quality of life is estimated at a quarter billion dollars. It can be shown that this estimate is quite conservative and the real value is possibly higher (Cnaan & Boddie, 2001).

In order to understand the congregational replacement value in context, we must assess the City of Philadelphia's annual commitment to social care. In 2002, the City of Philadelphia spent \$473,525,933 for services to children and youth through the Department of Human Services, \$14,902,777 for services to the homeless through the Department of Adult Services, and \$34,258,043 for services to the community through the Department of Recreation. In other words, the total social services budget of the city of Philadelphia is \$522,686,573 which includes space, salaries, and administration costs as well as direct services. Thus, the congregational replacement value reported above equals 47.8 percent of the annual City budget. When the two grand sums are combined, about one third of the cost to maintain quality of life in Philadelphia is voluntarily provided by local religious congregations.

Finally, we asked, "What percentage of the annual operating budget is earmarked for social services?" as opposed to operation costs or member development. Of the congregations that answered this question, the mean was 21.6 percent. That is, about two-fifths of the congregations' annual budget (excluding capital campaigns and schools) is designated to contribute to the quality of life of people in the community and in the city beyond the cost of maintaining the congregation property and staff.

The previous sections of this article demonstrated that relying on faith-based groups to provide social services is an inevitable and rational component to the American quest to reduce welfare costs and enhance efficiency. Given that so many Americans believe in God and attend religious congregations indicates

that numerous congregations are spread throughout the country, and every person has access to any number of them. We also demonstrated, based on our census of congregations in Philadelphia, that many congregations are heavily involved in social service provision. In fact, many human service organizations deny new clients eligibility for services if they have not first sought assistance from their own or a near by congregation. De-facto, American congregations turned out to be the national and local safety net, and public opinions show that most Americans expect congregations to provide welfare services to needy people (Pirog & Reingold, 2002). Now that the political and public discourse focuses on faith-based groups as the “new kid on the block” to provide services to the poor and disadvantaged, a question has emerged about their organizational behavior: What do we know about their capabilities and organizational strengths and weaknesses?

THE CONGREGATION AS A SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANIZATION: CAPACITY, CULTURE, AND ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

This section of the article will be divided into three key sub-themes. First, we will discuss congregational capacity in terms of membership size, funds, and other key resources. Second, we will discuss the unique cultural background that governs most congregations. Third, we will discuss issues pertaining to organizational behavior with two key subheadings: start-up of new projects by congregations and issues related to running social programs in congregational settings.

Capacity: Size, Community Base, Ethnicity, Budget, and Location and Space

Size. Among the congregations in this study, membership size ranges from a low of six members to a high of 13,000 members. On average, 247 people attend at least one worship service per week per congregation. The average size of active members (people attending at least monthly) of the congregations is 346 individuals including children. In order to achieve reliability, we ask all congregations to include children even if they are not officially viewed as members. It should be noted that when children are excluded, half the congregations in our study report a membership of less than 100 members. Our mean membership size is increased by a group of mega-churches (congregations attracting more than 1000 members each). This number, which is corroborated by other studies (Dudley & Roozen, 2001), suggests that many average-sized congregations have relatively few adult members who can implement social

programs. While size can be deceiving, we found a correlation between size and involvement in social service provision. Additionally, the existence of a full time clergy was also associated with social service involvement. Congregations without at least one full-time clergy were less likely to be involved in providing services than congregations with one or more full-time clergy. In other words, not all of the 2119 congregations in Philadelphia are equally poised to deliver social services.

Community Base. On average, almost half (44.5%) of all congregation members live within ten blocks of the congregation's site, 37.5 percent live within the city limits but beyond a ten-block radius, and 18 percent live outside of the city limits. Many people in the community told us that faith communities are considered hubs of trust and islands of peace and support within their communities. Among African American communities, the role of the congregation is particularly prominent. In an analysis of the National Survey of Black Americans, Taylor, Thornton, and Chatters (1987) report that 82.2 percent of African American adults who were surveyed said that the Black church has helped the condition of Blacks in America. The definition of "help" included but was not limited to: promoting of positive feelings; sustaining and strengthening; personal assistance; providing moral guidelines for behavior; personal or social help; and providing a sense of unity and gathering place in the community.

These findings imply that among nonprofit and community organizations, congregations are the most community-based social service organization, and their members have intimate understanding of the changing needs of people in the community. The only other community-attached organization is the public school. However, in urban America, schools are often distrusted or extremely distressed, with the community viewing them either as filled with outsiders who are not committed to the neighborhood, or who are unable to help (Sanders, 2000).

Ethnicity. An overwhelming majority of congregations (89.9%) reported that at least 75 percent of their members belong to one racial or ethnic group. The majority of the congregations in this sample were Black congregations (54.9%) and white congregations (26.2%). The sample also included Hispanic congregations (5.3%) and Asian-American congregations (3.5%). The high proportion of congregations that represent primarily one ethnicity suggests that congregations remain divided by ethnic lines, and to some extent, by class. As such, one may wonder if people of different ethnic groups and class-bases feel welcome to utilize services from homogenous social service providers, such as congregations. However, our observations did not reflect this to be a problem. Furthermore, social services offered by various human service or-

ganizations are often provided by staff that is of a class and/or race that is different from that of the clients (Fong & Gibbs, 1995).

Budget. Three out of ten congregations (31 percent) reportedly have annual budgets of less than \$50,000 and an additional quarter (26 percent) have a budget of between \$50,000 and \$100,000. A similar percent (23%) of congregations reported having a budget between \$100,000 and \$200,000, another 14 percent reported having a budget of between \$200,001 and \$500,000, and a slightly smaller number (6%) reported having a budget between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000. Only a small number of congregations (2 percent) reported having a budget of more than a million dollars a year. The reported budgets do not include building funds or school budgets.

Budget size is an important variable in explaining the scope of social services involvement, and our findings above suggest that over half of congregations have annual budgets of less than \$100,000. Given that for congregations, social service provision comes second to worship and maintenance, one wonders how feasible it is for such congregations to provide an additional formal program either at their own expense or by applying for a public grant. While almost all of them provide social services, the services are often small scale programs that rely on volunteers and use congregational space.

Location and Space. One of the noted assets that congregations bring to the social service arena is space. Congregations are dotted throughout communities and the majority own one or more buildings. Four-fifths (81.8%) of the congregations in our study own their properties and are able to use them for any use they see fit. Only 11.5 percent of the congregations have no space of their own. These congregations rent space from other congregations (guest congregations), use hotel halls, schools, and other spaces donated by willing owners. A little over half of the congregations (51.4%) reported using more than one property and about one of these congregations (14.2%) own three or more buildings. Often, additional buildings house schools, day care centers, day missions, youth programs, or homeless shelters. In many cases, space within these buildings is available for social programs throughout the week for community groups, community meetings, or local service delivery.

Large numbers of properties owned by the congregations are old buildings and thus suffer from structural problems that may inhibit social service delivery. For example, 17.2 percent of our sample reported roof leaks and need of repairs, and 13.9 percent reported leakage through walls or floors. In addition, the following building distresses were reported by congregations: wall stress and cracks (6.5%), electrical problems (5.2%), heating and cooling problems (8.3%), and problems meeting city codes (4.0%). The large majority of the congregations (69.4%) reported no building problems. It is reasonable to con-

sider that these sacred properties may be available for social service delivery when not used for worship, religious classes, and other sacramental purposes.

Overall, congregations in urban America are characterized by being there. They are located in every community and are accessible to local residents. Most congregations are relatively small in size, which often translates into services that are very personal in nature. Meanwhile, few congregations are large in size and resources. For the most part, congregations remain ethnically segregated—a fact that engenders trust and enhances the fabric of mutual assistance which is foundational for serving others. A majority of congregations are not financially strong, yet, on average, they allocate more than one-fifth of their budgets to social programs and services.

Cultural Background

As noted, the neglect of faith-based groups in the social work literature leaves us with limited knowledge on how to work with these groups, and how to collaborate with them on joint projects. For example, harnessing the unique contributions of communities of faith requires sensitivity to their character, appreciation of their faith, and willingness to work with organizations that simultaneously adhere to an “organizational” authority and to a “higher” authority (Chaves, 1998). The “higher” authority is often dominant in determining what services will be offered and under what conditions. In some cases, religious beliefs or doctrines may result in refusing to serve people who live certain life styles. A related situation may be that if the mission of the religious congregation or religious group changes so does their social service offering. It is imperative to understand that congregations’ primary *raison d’être* is worship and religious life, followed by organizational survival. Though congregational theologians rightly suggest that providing social services is an inherent and crucial part of being a congregation, the practical reality for most congregations is that providing social services is tertiary and depends on successful maintenance of the first two functions of the congregation.

A clergy that we interviewed used the following analogy about understanding religion in the context of a congregation: “For us religion is everywhere. When you make a pancake you see an egg next to the flour, margarine, and sugar. Focus on this egg. When the pancake is done, the egg is in it, but you do not see it. So, for us is religion. It is everywhere, and yet you can’t see it but you know it is there, respect it, and know that without it there is no pancake.” What this clergy is referring to is the pervasiveness of religion in everything they do. In the name of religion, a congregation may start a social service and the focus of a program will change when the spirit moves it. Furthermore, in congregations it is common for people (staff, lay people, and clients alike) to

take time from work to pray and thank God. Faith interweaves into the planning, delivery and alteration of social services. Congregational members are used to having people in their building who are theologically like-minded and with whom they can discuss faith and God, and as such, are comfortable with blending faith and social service. As shown by several studies, congregations have varied styles of delivery and overt religious talk, actions, or symbols may or may not be an observable part of the social service (Sider, Olson, & Unruh, 2002).

Congregations tend to carry out their ministries alone. As Cnaan and colleagues (2002) found, congregations do not view themselves as an arm of the state or any other group, but rather as an independent body that acts upon its own cues. The major reason to offer a social program was consistently “acting out people’s faith.” Most often, a program evolves when a member of the congregation, usually a clergy or lay leader, observes a need and shares his or her observations with the congregation. What follows is usually a discussion about the problem and the congregation’s desire and ability to help. While many such initiatives/testimonials go nowhere, some materialize into programs designed to help those in need. Since this initiative for serving comes from within the congregation, it is unlikely that those engaged in delivering the service will attempt to find partners. While many congregations have members who volunteer or assist community and nonprofit organizations, congregations like to “own” their social programs. That is, helping others in need becomes a collective spiritual endeavor borne out through congregational ministry. The idea of sharing a ministry or program delivery with an outside or non-religious organization is far less common. Even when it is obvious to local faith communities that the needs are greater than their capabilities, there is a proclivity to go at it alone and resistance to calling upon other groups to partner in program delivery. To be fair, 36.3 percent of congregations in our sample are partners in interfaith or non-religious collaborations; however, among the listed social programs 66.1 percent are carried by the congregation alone. Furthermore, as noted above 62.5% of the congregations reported to collaborate with faith partners and 45.7% with secular partners to provide social services.

Another notable characteristic of many congregations is that they work informally and without protocol. People react to whatever is needed and the idea of a bureaucracy seems impersonal and even threatening to members. For example, many congregations do not have personnel policies and view them with some wariness. In general, we found that people are hired with a handshake and are told about salary and benefits, but the expectation is that the person will be immersed into the congregation, often along with their families. In most congregations there are no formal procedures for employee evaluation.

Salary raises and dismissals are done informally without scheduled periodic reviews.

In addition, congregation staff, while possibly having professional experience, often have limited or no experience in external (aside from members) fund-raising, grant proposal writing, or formal program development and evaluation. Further, as congregations are exempted from filing an IRS report, many operate without strict accounting of their finances (Jeavons & Basinger, 2000).

In contrast to congregations' informality, professionals in human service organizations are often hired to perform a specific set of skills. They use their training and education to execute clearly defined tasks and responsibilities. Congregations, however, tend to have people who not only are volunteers, but may become involved in any number of overlapping activities. The same set of people who plan Sunday music may also organize food distribution. It is common for anyone in the building to be called upon to help with certain tasks that require more hands. One will see the senior clergy fixing the boiler and carrying boxes of food. Therefore, volunteers are utilized not only for their professional training or education but for whatever is needed for the congregation to provide a service.

Unlike formal service organizations, in congregation programs, time spent visiting, chatting, and relating is valued and accepted as strengthening the membership or the quality of the service. Using paid time for work-related or task-specific functions is expected, and time spent "relating to others" is minimized. While it is common for the congregation members to do whatever is needed whenever it is needed, human service organization employees may see such expectations on them as an intrusion, violation of their contract, or an interference in their ability to complete the task for which they were hired.

Organizational Behavior

The last section of this article discusses issues of organizational behavior. We divided this section into two sub-sections. We first discuss issues pertaining to start up of new programs by congregations followed by discussing the day-to-day management of social programs by congregations.

Starting-Up Social Programs

The process through which congregations versus secular organizations arrive at social service delivery is diametrically opposed. Secular human service organizations often respond to donor preference or the availability of public grants to fund their activity. Every nuance of the funding stream influences

service options and scope of care. Congregations, on the other hand, often depend on internal resources and use members' desires, volunteers, and available space as the cornerstone of their services. In our study, we asked interviewees about how some 3,922 different programs were initiated. In almost two-thirds of the cases the initiation came from the pastor (64.7%), followed by congregational members (28.2%), congregational committee (12.3%), and congregational staff (7.5%). Note that in some cases these percentages are overlapping as a program can be initiated by a variety of actors. A decision of whether and in what area to develop services is based on being compelled by a need, confirming it with others, forming a group to plan a service, and then carrying out a program. There is almost never a commitment to an external agency, and hence the service may be modified or cut as needed. In sharp contrast, very few congregational programs were initiated by a call from the outside or a funding opportunity. Outside initiators may include diocese or judicatories (3.9%), human service organizations (1.9%), neighborhood associations or coalitions (1.6%), other congregations (1.1%), government agencies (0.9%), and others (4.3%). When we viewed all programs and compared in-house initiation versus externally-encouraged initiation, the difference is extremely large. The overwhelming majority of congregational programs are initiated in-house (91.8%) as compared to externally initiated (11.5%).

Local religious congregations, with few notable exceptions, have limited resources and operate at maximum capacity. That is, the budget and other resources are maximized. Often the hope is that nothing will break, and that there will not be any need for extra expenses. By far, the majority of congregations that we interviewed indicated that their financial situation was "sound or struggling" (90.2%), as indicated by a tremulous balance between expenditures and income, and only 9.8 percent reported to be financially strong. This stretching of financial and other resources puts the congregation in a vulnerable situation. Collaborating with others exposes vulnerabilities and limits the congregation's flexibility to deal with crises as they come. For example, if a congregation makes a commitment to pay for food at a certain joint event, and then its heating system fails, the priority will be given to fixing the heating system and not to supporting the joint event. Being uncertain of how many times crises like this may occur, and having very tight budgets influences many congregations to shy away of collaborating with others, and with others who have abundant resources.

Members of faith communities, particularly clergy, are circumspect about the intentions of external groups, especially the government. Most outside partners, foundations, academic institutions, city units, and human service organizations are viewed as short-term partners who find the community and congregation trendy, but who will disappear as soon as something even trend-

ier will be declared. Often, external commitment is limited for the duration of a project or the duration of a grant. Community residents and congregation members and their relatives who live in the community are attached to it for decades, and they have seen many external partners come and go. Hence, their immediate understanding and expectation is for the external people to use the community for something that they need, and then leave it with no real progress. This perception makes congregations less hospitable to partnership with external organizations and further enhances the intended isolation of congregations.

Running Social Programs in Congregations

Congregations rarely have to record or report the way they provide services, or who is eligible and partakes of a social service. Given that the majority of programs are planned, financed, and implemented “in-house,” little reporting takes place and no formal reporting is required. In many cases, annual reports or committee meetings devote little more than a paragraph or a few sentences to update other members on the outcomes of a program. This informality and lack of attention to detailed recording makes the service provision more personal and enables congregations to serve people without strict adherence to eligibility criteria. Secular human service organizations, which draw their resources from public funds or foundations, are required to monitor service delivery and document client contacts and services. As such, the service may take on a formal and regulated flavor compared to congregations’ delivery.

In an evaluation of a TANF program in New York City that was faith-based, Rock (2002) noted that clients described frontline workers as more friendly and respectful. These workers, although paid employees, were also congregation members who felt ownership for the service as part of their faith. Similarly, Goggin and Orth (2002), in a study comparing faith-based and secular service provision for interim housing, observed that faith-based organizations were perceived as being more holistic in their service through trying to address all a client’s needs rather than just focusing on housing. In this study, clients perceived front-line staff at most faith-based organizations as more caring than staff at the government agency. Clients described faith-based staff with words such as dedicated, nurturing and loving.

Congregations, as noted above, are prevalent in communities and range from very small to very large. A human service organization that wishes to collaborate with them may find it difficult to approach all of them. Thus, when planning a collaboration, human service organizations select a few congregations and ignore the rest. This potentially leaves hundreds of congregations feeling

snubbed and resentful. Collaboration with one congregation may indicate to the many others that the human service organization did not want to work with them. Often local rivalry and turf building prevent larger collaborations from existing in the same community.

Similar to all human interactions, collaborations are frequently drawn along lines that advance the status of certain clergy. The decision to join or partner with another group is often filtered through “what good it will do to me and my congregation.” However, such collaborations potentially open up the door for wider community participation and representation from many subgroups that otherwise would be excluded. Additionally, a congregation’s involvement in local coalitions may be limited to the congregation’s support of the coalition with funds and formal endorsement but not with their members’ spirit, enthusiastic volunteering, and commitment (Pipes & Ebaugh, 2002).

Congregations often lack experience in strategic planning. A congregation’s plans and ideas may be inappropriate or unrealistic according to human service organizations standards. As noted, most programs in congregations evolve naturally and with little formal planning. Similarly, a decision to close down a program is not based on formal planning but on member preferences or changing needs. When asked about a decision to close down a program, many clergy responded that “the fit between the program and the congregational ‘call’ is no longer there.” In the event that the demand for service increases beyond the congregational capacity, a key decision must be made: “Shall we relinquish control of our ‘ministry’ to an external source or keep providing services below the level of demand?” In other words, enlarging the scope of care implies inviting nonreligious service providers or other congregations to join in. This is not a simple choice, as enlargement also signifies that the program is no longer owned by the congregation but is shared with others (Smith, 2002).

Many of our interviewees preferred smaller-scale, intimate service provision and maintained services as congregation-owned programs. This may stem from the ideal as social service provision as a means of “actualizing faith” in which benefiting a larger number of needy people is beyond the traditional scope of ministry. This does not imply an uncaring approach, but highlights the preference of maintaining a spirited and personalized mode of care rather than a formal bureaucratic attitude towards recipients of help.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As shown above, congregations in America are the most prevalent and trusted community organizations. These hubs of social concern and pro-social

human nuclei are woven like a thick tapestry all over America. Given the high level of religious involvement of Americans, and the country's very limited welfare program, it is natural for faith communities to extend their involvement in local social service provision as a manifestation of members' faith. The political elite in America is as religious as other residents and is all too fond of the potential embedded in faith-based care. As such, since 1996 the visibility and role of congregations and other faith-based organizations in providing publicly-funded social services is on the rise. Yet social work and other human service disciplines know very little about the work of these organizations and their organizational characteristics.

As we demonstrated, based on a one-city census of congregations, congregations' contribution to people's quality of life is immense. Funding this level of care by other means in Philadelphia would cost at about a quarter of a billion dollars and would mean uprooting a rich web of social care and connectedness and the comprehensive network of referrals and informal care that go with it. In fact, in America, it does not overstate the reality to assert that the only real community organization capable of reaching every person in need on an on-going basis is the local religious congregation.

As suggested, communities of faith bring with them a wealth of resources that many traditional human service providers lack. They are located in the heart of the community and almost on every block. They have physical space that is maintained for religious purposes on weekends and evenings but is often available for community-oriented programs at no or low cost. Congregations usually have a pro-social perspective and wish to improve the quality of life in the community. They demonstrate endurance in terms of being in the community for a long time and credibility for consistently attempting to help neighbors. Additionally, congregations have access to potential volunteers that can be asked to join collaborative social programs (Wineburg, 1988).

However, viewing them as social service providers ought to be done with great respect and understanding of their unique organizational characteristics. Their first *raison d'être* is to provide a communal framework for their faith. Faith undercuts every aspect and activity of a congregation. People come together in search of spiritual fulfillment, and social service provision is only one aspect of that quest and a means for its actualization. As such, social services are very important, but not the primary concern of the collective.

Human service organizations can work with congregations, use their space, and harness their volunteers, but they have to be cognizant of faith communities' identity and role in the community. We have listed some key issues pertaining to working with congregations and understanding their unique nature. However, one should also keep in mind that all organizations are not the same. Congregations vary in size, membership, resources, and religious commit-

ment. Some are very theologically liberal and some are very prescriptive. The level of religious commitment and delivery style influences social care and willingness to collaborate with public entities and groups of other faith traditions.

Finally, it should be noted that as impressive as congregations are in the social services arena, they cannot be a substitute for the public sector. It is not known whether most religious congregations are capable of, or desire to expand their current provision of various services. This unknown factor suggests that any expectation that religious congregations can be a panacea for reduced public welfare spending is premature and unwise. For those congregations who are able to and wish to expand their current social programs, it appears that time, technical assistance, and supportive funding are required for congregations to provide high-quality, stable, and lasting services (Sinha, Cnaan, Jones, & Dichter, 2003).

Congregations can well complement the government commitment for people in need. They can reduce public expenditure but only at the margins. An expectation that such diverse and often small organizations can substitute for government welfare is unrealistic and dangerous. While social service administrators will benefit from knowing and in some cases collaborating with these organizations, be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. It should be understood that congregations possess their own sets of resources and limitations and cannot be expected to carry the load of American welfare on their shoulders.

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