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Review of Peter J. Wosh, *Covenant House: Journey of a Faith-based Charity*

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Review of Peter J. Wosh, *Covenant House: Journey of a Faith-based Charity*

Abstract

In *Covenant House: Journey of a Faith-Based Charity*, Peter Wosh provides us with a modern historical review of one of the most famous, and infamous, faith-based social service agencies. Covenant House is the creation of Bruce Ritter, a Franciscan friar who witnessed the growth of youth runaways in New York and established a network of local as well as national and international semifranchised agencies to help them. The case study of Covenant House contains almost everything for which a nonprofit scholar can ask: the formation of a successful nonprofit organization (NPO), an analysis of growth, charismatic leadership, expansion, crisis and demise of the founder, rebirth, and recovery. Of the many cases I have read throughout the years, this one is by far the most extensive and carefully crafted.

Comments

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Covenant House: Journey of a Faith-Based Charity, by Peter J. Wosh. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 296 pp. \$39.95 (cloth).

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In *Covenant House: Journey of a Faith-Based Charity*, Peter Wosh provides us with a modern historical review of one of the most famous, and infamous, faith-based social service agencies. Covenant House is the creation of Bruce Ritter, a Franciscan friar who witnessed the growth of youth runaways in New York and established a network of local as well as national and international semifranchised agencies to help them. The case study of Covenant House contains almost everything for which a nonprofit scholar can ask: the formation of a successful nonprofit organization (NPO), an analysis of growth, charismatic leadership, expansion, crisis and demise of the founder, rebirth, and recovery. Of the many cases I have read throughout the years, this one is by far the most extensive and carefully crafted.

Wosh is the director of the program in archival management at New York University, and he makes impressive use of the agency's archive. It is amazing how many records Covenant House retained, and Wosh did not leave any page unread. Although Covenant House sprouted under charismatic and dominant leadership, one can only wonder how so much data were carefully and meticulously preserved. Wosh and a few staff members also conducted numerous face-to-face interviews that informed the book as well as a comprehensive search of the popular media for the years that Covenant House has operated. In fact, almost every paragraph is accompanied by an endnote that directs the reader to the relevant interview or the box of records in the Covenant House archives.

The story of Covenant House is somewhat similar to that of other NPOs that were formed by a charismatic leader who tackled an important social ill and later on lost his or her direction and almost brought the agency into oblivion. Ritter was charged with sexual improprieties and financial embezzlement. Although none of the allegations were proven, they were enough for Ritter to leave his creation, and he lived the rest of his life simply and away from the media. Covenant House managed to have a comeback and is now operating at full capacity with financial security. In each chapter that covers a historical era in the evolution of Covenant House, Wosh elegantly mixes the background of the place and time, the characteristics and backgrounds of the key characters, and the organizational changes and decisions.

The first part of the book places major emphasis on Bruce Ritter. Wosh quite harshly scrutinizes Ritter's version of how Covenant House evolved and

finds numerous holes in the founder's glorified version of the agency's history. Wosh provides us with Ritter's story, which tends to focus and emphasize epiphanies and pure intentions, and then juxtaposes it with data collected from documents and interviews. The data invariably suggest that Ritter was the right person at the right time and slowly grasped the problems and the possibilities. The reporter who published the first allegation against Ritter (Charles M. Sennott) also wrote a book chastising Bruce Ritter. Wosh does not join him in demonizing Ritter, but he is not always successful in giving Ritter fair treatment and often presents him as a megalomaniac, erratic, prone to bravado, and hotheaded. Thanks to Ritter and his work, thousands of runaway kids found a safe haven. His many shortcomings are human and may be found in almost any founder of a successful organization, but his contributions cannot be mired because he was not modest or careful enough. In contrast, Sister Mary Rose McGeedy, who took over the agency at the height of its crisis in 1990 and ran it until 2003, is presented in a saintly manner, and not one personal, administrative, or public flaw of hers is shared with the reader.

Covenant House under Ritter, and in the decade following his departure, managed to grow from a small homegrown NPO to a multimillion dollar organization, with branches in various American and international cities. Covenant House became the McDonald's of youth services. Being able to branch out and franchise is a dream of many successful nonprofit leaders (authoritarian or otherwise). Bruce Ritter managed to pull it off, and his successor continued with this trend. In 1999, Covenant House operated a budget of \$88 million, 3 times the amount of money that the federal government spent on youth runaways. Needless to say, this is not a typical NPO. Covenant House found a niche that was occupied by a few small and uncoordinated NPOs and captured it in New York and elsewhere.

As with many other nonprofit agencies, Covenant House struggled with the idea of becoming too dependent on the government. During its early days, most of the fiscal support came from public contracts; as the organization grew and its reputation flourished, the reliance on government money was deliberately reduced. The Covenant House Board and Ritter agreed to limit service that would meet state criteria and move to open admission. This decision became the hallmark of the organization. Covenant House continues to admit all youth regardless of whether they meet state criteria.

Wosh demonstrates how a Franciscan friar dealt with youth runaways as a problem centered on pornography and juvenile prostitution and made it into a religious calling and moral issue. Similar to all founders and public figures, he was able to frame a social problem (youth runaways) in a way that made it sensational, worthy of media coverage, and financially appealing to donors. He could have chosen a less dramatic frame, but then, Covenant House would have never been the force it became in helping youth runaways in New York and elsewhere. The choice to focus on pornography and juvenile prostitution may not have been rational, and it evolved with the media coverage of the topic. Nonetheless, based on his faith and ability to know what will appeal to

donors, Wosh wholeheartedly adopted pornography and juvenile prostitution as the causes of youth runaways.

Covenant House was and is a religious organization in many other ways. Much support comes from the New York archdiocese, and the board has stipulated that key positions in the organization can be filled only by Catholics. Much of the funding comes from parishes and members of the faith, and appeals are directed at wealthy Catholics. The cardinal has major influence over the organization and provides financial support. Wosh describes in detail how at one time, when Mayor Koch decided to enforce equal opportunity rules on all agencies involved in business with the city, the archdiocese selected Covenant House to be the agency to fight the policy, and not even Bruce Ritter could oppose it. And when Covenant House was in crisis and Ritter was finally out of the organization, the search for a replacement was within Catholic circles, and he was replaced by a nun.

Wosh provides us with a fascinating in-depth case study of one faith-based NPO from the early 1970s to today. I am not familiar with any other nonprofit case study that is so extensive and well documented. Any student of NPO should read this book as a means to understand the personal, social, and administrative complexity of organizational life throughout time.

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Michael Leo Owens

Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society, by Robert Wuthnow. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. 354 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

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Regardless of one's opinion of George W. Bush's presidency, social scientists who study the intersection of religion, social welfare policy, and poverty in the United States owe the Bush administration a note of thanks, for its legislative proposals and bureaucratic rule making have given them much to write about during the past 4 years. To date, the *ne plus ultra* of these works is Robert Wuthnow's book, which many will find of interest to the academy and of consequence to civil society. Wuthnow wrote it out of "exasperation with the lack of understanding about religion that is so frequently evident among policy makers and journalists" (p. xiii). What he produced is a text that will permit them, as well as other social scientists, social services practitioners, and others, to speak more intelligently about religion in American society and to question more ably and scrupulously the claims of those who elevate faith, religion, and moral values as panaceas to poverty.