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**ANALYSIS OF A COLLABORATIVE FAITH-BASED DEMONSTRATION
PROJECT: THE UNIQUE CAPACITY OF CONGREGATION- AND
COMMUNITY-BASED COLLABORATION**

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Analysis of a Collaborative Faith-Based Demonstration Project: The Unique Capacity of Congregation- and Community-Based Collaboration

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The following statement best expresses the intent of the North Philadelphia Cluster of United Methodist Churches, a community- and congregation-based endeavor to address the needs of youth at risk in the surrounding neighborhoods:

Cookman United Methodist Church and the NPC-UMC plan to demonstrate that average-sized and average-resourced congregations, properly united and supported by city and community partners, can provide uniquely relevant and effective services that respond to the needs of the high-risk older youth who reside in their communities.

This paper summarizes the development and implementation of the stated endeavor, and highlights the strengths and limits of the collaboration over the past one and a half years.

History and Development

The North Philadelphia Cluster of United Methodist Churches (NPC-UMC) has launched a monumental effort to create and expand existing services for youth at risk in their communities. This effort was partially begun through a prior effort of Cookman United Methodist Church, one of the first congregations in the U.S. to receive funding through Charitable Choice. In the fall of 2001, Cookman's "Transitional Journey" program, designed for welfare to work clients, responded to younger clientele who came to the program for education and work skills training. With an additional grant from the city, the program began educating, mentoring, and counseling 23 high-risk teens who had dropped out of other traditional educational programs. Cookman's alternative high school curriculum allows them to earn credits toward a high school diploma.

At the same time, in monthly meetings with seven other United Methodist congregations from North Philadelphia (The North Philadelphia Cluster of United Methodist Churches), a common concern was emerging. The NPC-UMC was concerned about teens missing from their congregations. Church members realized that during these years of growing independence, church-going teens often stop attending church activities. Outside the church, large numbers of older teens, lacking relevant and supervised school involvement, drift into "the street", where fights and drug activity are unavoidable. Teens who refuse to be part of "the street" environment often have little choice but to remain isolated indoors (Anderson, 1999, Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). High rates of truancy, births to teen mothers, poverty and singly-headed female households characterize many areas of North Philadelphia. The police districts in which the congregations are located recorded the highest rates of

robbery and aggravated assault in 2001 (Philadelphia Coalition for Kids, 2001). Lack of resources, overcrowding, and poor educational incentives leave many students feeling that school is irrelevant (Furstenberg, et. al., 1999). Large numbers of teens, as high as 68 percent in some public high schools, have dropped out of the institutional school system (University of Pennsylvania Cartographic Mapping Lab, 2002).

The NPC-UMC began with a simple idea: to create safe spaces called “teen lounges” where older teens could be off the street in a safe, supervised place that offers various activities and educational help as needed, where youth could relax and interact with one another and concerned adults. The concept of teen lounges remains one of the central components of the Cluster’s outreach vision for youth at-risk, but the demonstration project’s model has expanded to a network of programs. Focusing on the educational needs of at-risk youth, ages 14 to 21, through home-schooling, general and specialized tutoring, the model also includes entrepreneurial projects, computer instruction, mentoring, and peer and professional counseling and case management.

The 35 youth currently in Cookman’s home school program are representative of high-risk youth in the community: all have dropped out of high school; more than one third are offenders; 25 percent have used or sold drugs; their reading skills range from the 2nd to the 4th grade; more than one third are parents or have been pregnant; 30 percent have had mental health issues; four receive public assistance and nine have been homeless.

In Philadelphia, the Report Card on the Well-Being of Children and Youth rates 26 indicators of health, education, safety, and other factors that bear on children’s lives. In a summary of the most recent report, the Philadelphia Inquirer stated “The number of first-time ninth graders, graduating in four years increased... to 58 percent in 2000-2001... each day more than 20,000 Philadelphia public school students (14 percent) are missing from school without excuse. More teenagers reported having sex, putting them at risk for AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.” (Philadelphia Coalition for Kids, 2002).

The NPC-UMC project will expand the successful homeschool program from Cookman to two other congregation sites, with Teen Lounges, tutoring, counseling, and social programming at each congregation site to reach a minimum of 100 youth in 2003. This endeavor calls for Master’s social workers, adult tutors and mentors, professionally trained educators, and peer counselors. To implement the vision, the NPC-UMC needs substantial funding and collaboration with community partners. One identified partner is the Philadelphia Department of Human Services. In response to a city Request for Proposals earlier in the year for truancy prevention and reduction programs, the NPC-UMC has been awarded a tenth of the proposed budget from the city thus far.

Future Search Conference

To kickstart the community-wide demonstration project and to enlist partners who shared a vision for youth, the Cluster hosted a Future Search Conference titled “Changing the Stigma: Reaching and Supporting Youth At-Risk in North Philadelphia.” With outside funding obtained with the help of a local resource director, the Cluster invited community stakeholders from various arenas to the three-day strategic planning conference at no cost.

Seventy-five people from the community, including eighteen youth from four churches participated in the conference. On a Thursday afternoon in the basement of Mt. Zion United Methodist Church, representatives of Temple University, United Methodist Neighborhood Services, Metropolitan Christian Council of Philadelphia, the Salvation Army, Eastern University’s Campolo School for Social Change, Youth Services, Incorporated, and the Department of Human Services met. For three days, participants used personal and group reflection about the history of their neighborhood and the world to understand what had occurred in lower North Philadelphia since the mid-century. Participants talked about community life and envisioned what their community could be in 10 years, focusing always on what should be possible for today’s and tomorrow’s youth. On the final day of the conference, participants self-selected into action groups and began making goals and concrete action plans.

Traditionally, in many denominations, regional Clusters primarily support one another through shared worship on major religious holidays. It is rare for religiously-based clusters to adopt and implement specific outreaches at the Cluster level. This endeavor of the NPC-UMC indicates the Cluster’s unique mission-mindedness which stems from their connection and concern for their community. The Future Search Conference developed the Cluster’s visionary role and spurred the group to work together more closely. Other positive outcomes of the Future Search Conference included 1) documenting and fleshing out the community vision into which the dream for “Youth Centers” fits; and 2) helping make concrete a fiduciary agreement. One of the organizations at the Future Search agreed to serve as a fiduciary intermediary through which the Cluster will apply for and manage funding. This is a significant relationship for several reasons. First, the presence of a strongly related but independent fiduciary ensures impartiality among the Cluster congregations. Second, funders prefer working with an established intermediary, in this case a 501(c)(3) religious organization, that has a financial management track record. Partnering in this financial venture is a new role for both the Cluster and the intermediary.

The Future Search Conference was a positive experience for the Cluster and community partners. The Future Search Conference allowed people to meet face to face, voice their concerns and struggles born of working with and living with youth at risk, and build a common vision. This process added to feeling community, hope, connectedness and empowerment in a tough area of North Philadelphia.

Strengths and Limitations of Congregations, Collaboration and Youth At Risk

The process of implementing the vision to provide youth with alternate pathways to adulthood and vocational success has not been quickly traveled. As mentioned previously, some of the on-going tasks of the Cluster are to develop funding and new administrative roles. These tasks are not germane to faith-based collaboration but may be affected by the faith-based nature. First, there is undeniable cautiousness from most stakeholders (public and private) about working with faith-based groups. The cautiousness may be related to concerns about financial accountability or to legal concerns about partnering with overtly faith-based organizations. Second, faith-based organizations may come to the partnership table with expectations about their freedom to incorporate elements of their faith into their delivery of service.

The recent report by The Rockefeller Institute of Government Roundtable on Religious and Social Welfare Policy about New York City's demonstration program regarding outreach to remaining welfare recipients highlights some of the negotiation issues that were addressed with faith-based agencies. New York State contracted services to four faith-based intermediary organizations, which in turn contracted with congregations to provide outreach and counseling centers (Rock, 2002). In the initial phases of implementation, several new working agreements were needed. The local congregations establishing the outreach centers expected a certain amount of flexibility with this task to create their own solutions rather than adopting the city's. Second, the intermediaries were expecting to select their own managers while government officials had already done so without the intermediaries' input. In response, the intermediaries went to the state administration (New York City Human Resource Administration) which set up a meeting between the intermediary and government partners. A joint executive board was formed, and monthly meetings with local outreach staff, government officials, and intermediary leaders were established. The report states that the attributes of shared leadership, localized management, and building relationships of trust and respect were key to the projects' success (Rock, 2002). Working with and among faith-based collaborations may be unique in expectations of flexibility, shared leadership, and an emphasis on relationships. The following section explores some of the strengths and limitations specific to the NPC-UMC demonstration project.

Strengths

Many strengths dwell in community- and congregation-based endeavors. Faith-based programs that grow from their rootedness in community congregations are a source of relationships and practical support. Simply put, congregation members are also neighborhood residents. In the eight churches that make up the NPC-UMC, four of the congregations have 75 to 99 percent of their members residing within a one mile radius. These are the same neighborhoods in which youth at risk live. Neighborhood residents are well suited to recommend youth for employment, to hire youth, more likely to mentor youth in ways

that are culturally relevant, and are more likely to support youth through formal and informal mentoring by coming to youth's graduation, performances, etc. Such relational ties add to a youth's sense of continuity, compassion and accountability in their neighborhood (Ianni, 1989). Being "community-based" in addition to congregation-based is an important resource.

In community- and congregation-based collaboration, adult and peer mentors provide role modeling to neighborhood youth. In a world in which teens feel that their options are hopeless, role models from their neighborhood expand the vocational options to which a youth is exposed. At Cookman's Transitional Journey program, several staff members came through the program as students. The staff's ability to empathize is linked to their positive encouragement and serves as an example of someone who came through that situation and is in a better place.

The study of the New York City demonstration project also pointed out the importance of relationships. One staff member expressed that she did not try to push religion on clients, but saw them as whole persons whose overwhelming issues deserved to be listened to without condescension (Rock, 2002). At Cookman's Transitional Journey program, staff members stress flexibility in working with and around students' personal lives and responsibilities such as caring for sick children or attending court dates. At Cookman, a full time staff member calls students who are absent not to make the student feel guilty or ashamed for missing class, but to ask how the student is doing and what is going on in their life (Sinha, 2000).

Community- and congregation-based efforts are also sources of caring and concern. Congregations care for one another through visits and giving food, rides, prayer, etc. This attitude of care and concern is expanded to persons who interact with congregation members through a program. In the New York City demonstration project, faith-based outreach workers were observed to be patient, empathetic, and non-judgmental (Rock, 2002). In a study comparing faith-based and secular service provision for interim housing, it was observed that faith-based organizations were perceived as being more holistic in their service. Clients perceived front-line staff at most faith-based organizations as more caring, dedicated and loving than staff at a government agency. (Goggin & Orth, 2002).

In many congregations, treating others with dignity, "as you would want to be treated" is emphasized. It may be that volunteers and staff who work in a faith-based social service environment are members of congregations that stress treating others with dignity and consideration. This source of emotional guidance and encouragement is seldom reflected in analysis of faith-based organizations, but it is a unique and important resource for congregation members who are also volunteers and staff.

Limitations

One of the possible limitations of this project is maintaining an effective balance of qualified volunteers and staff. Attracting and maintaining volunteers and staff who are qualified for the job, who are committed and dependable, is a necessity. Some of the Cluster congregations' have many members aged 64 and over, but retirement age volunteers, many of whom remain employed to ease financial responsibilities, have limited time. For others, family needs dictate full schedules. It should be noted that lack of volunteers is not limited to faith-based efforts, but is a constant recruitment concern for all nonprofits that depend on volunteers. In this regard, faith- and community-based efforts may have an advantage by having access to community and congregation members who are qualified and who "have a heart" for the kind of volunteer opportunities that are needed. In the Cluster demonstration project, several Master's level social workers have been identified who are also members of the congregations. When this is the case, staff and volunteers are connected to the project as professionals in the field but also through their faith community.

It is important to emphasize that a project of this magnitude cannot be run professionally with all volunteers, or with an inadequate budget. If public and private funders seek to explore and expand the capacity of religious organizations to respond to social ills in the wider society, then substantial investments are required. In the New York City demonstration project, the observation was made that modest reimbursements to the congregations for service provision impeded the ability of smaller congregations to remain in the project (Rock 2002).

Measurement and Evaluation

We present here a topic whose brevity in this paper belies its critical importance in the arena of evaluating faith-based social services' provision: the proper measurement of "faith" and the impact of faith-based services. What kind of evaluation methods are needed to assess faith-based social service effectiveness? For example, how would one isolate the impact of "caring and concern" from a more specifically spiritual base? How is the level of faith integration best compared across programs? Does the prior faith commitment or experience of clients impact their perception and response to a faith-based environment? Apart from "secular" outcomes, are there "spiritual" outcomes as self-acceptance and hope?

Researchers are discussing whether contemporary methods of outcome evaluation are appropriate, comprehensive, and sensitive to such questions. In *The scope and scale of faith-based social services*, produced by The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, Rockefeller Institute of Government, typologies of faith integration in organizations are presented, as well as an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of several methodologies. However, the review lacks any discussion about the

impact of the faith factor on participants from the perspective of participants, an important source of evaluation.

In evaluating the NPC-UMC demonstration project, we will use mixed methods to maximize the sources of data with which to evaluate the outcomes. Two self-report survey measures have been selected. The Comprehensive Adolescent Severity Index (CASI) and the Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality surveys assess change in education level, use of free time, peer and key relationships, mental health, and religiosity (Meyers, et. al., 1998; Fetzer Institute, 1999). The CASI, used extensively in the U. S. and abroad, offers a database of 1400 cases against which to compare data from the NPC-UMC project.

In addition, site observation, interviews, and focus groups will assess youth perceptions, use of religious themes, and interactions with staff and volunteers. This data will allow NPC-UMC personnel and researchers to assess the level of integration of various faith activities, which will be compared to typologies developed by Sider and Unruh (1999). More importantly, this data will afford valuable insight into what “success,” faith activities and outcomes are viewed as significant by youth.

Conclusion

As noted by Philadelphia’s Director of Faith- and Community Based Initiatives to Cookman’s pastor, Donna L. Jones, “...what [secular services lack] is the capacity to activate...” Nick Taliaferro was commenting on the ability of congregational volunteers and program staff to inspire the extremely at-risk youth. When a youth comes into contact with staff and volunteers at congregation-based programs, they come into contact with the understanding and hope of people who know where they’ve been. Youth come into contact with the skills, experience, role models, and practical support they need to transform their lives.

In neighborhoods where the local congregation remains one of the few enduring and respected institutions, the civic community cannot afford to overlook their niche in the realm of social service provision. In a society whose inner cities have suffered dramatically in the past half century, particularly youth at risk in these neighborhoods, every attempt to support and garner the capabilities and vision already present in the communities must be made. Given the unique nature, strengths and limitations of congregation- and community-based collaboration, appropriate support and flexible partnerships must continue to be created and sustained.

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