

## **Identifying Effective Practices in Urban Faith-Based Social Service Programs: The Challenges of Designing and Conducting Research**

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We are writing this paper in the middle of the first year of a 30-month research project<sup>1</sup> designed to identify the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in addressing challenges of urban poverty. Baylor University School of Social Work is leading this project with a team of researchers from Baylor University's business school, the schools of social work at the University of Pittsburgh and Virginia Commonwealth University, and the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California. This paper describes some of the challenges of designing and conducting a national research study of faith-based organizations.

### **Overview of the Project**

The following research questions are guiding our work: What are promising and effective practices in the delivery of social services by faith-based organizations? What are models of collaborative multi-sector social service programs that involve faith-based organizations? What are the key institutional factors that are necessary to engage in such collaborative work and provide quality services? What are the types of services for which faith-based organizations appear to be especially well suited and those for which they may be less well suited? What is the role of faith in direct social service programs operated by faith-based organizations? We recognized that addressing these questions would require a complexity of methodologies to describe and evaluate the processes, outcomes, and impact of faith-based organizations and their collaborative partners.

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Moreover, we are studying different kinds of programs that respond to the various dimensions of urban poverty (e.g. workforce development programs; programs designed to prevent and respond to the problems of juvenile delinquency, school failure and teen pregnancy prevention programs; community violence prevention programs, and child abuse/neglect prevention and intervention programs).

We expected to find many faith-based programs that have not evaluated adequately their service outcome and impact. One of the characteristics of religious organizations, and especially congregations, is that they tend to focus more on the service act (effort) than the service outcome (impact). Being faithful to take action in response to human need is just as or more relevant than being successful in alleviating that need, especially when the causes of suffering are complex and not easily resolved. Therefore, many programs describe their work using only counts of service outputs and anecdotal reports of effect and impact, not research or program evaluation. We determined, therefore, to choose service programs that show particular promise according to professional social service standards and to develop replicable outcome and impact measures that can inform the current discussion about the role of faith-based social service programs in the United States, even though they may not have strong program evaluation methodologies in place.

We adapted characteristics of “promising programs” from the work of John Orr, one of our research colleagues at USC. These characteristics describe the sample in each urban community: (1) seen locally as highly successful in delivering services; (2) exemplifying the power of informal and/or contractual collaboration in leveraging the capacity of faith-based organizations and public agencies to address poverty; (3) breaking new ground in their strategies, materials, and/or collaborative organizational models; or already functioning as regularized elements of a service delivery option in which public and private program complement each other; and (4) providing

models that might be replicable in other similar organizations and/or show promise of attracting long-term, stable financial support.

### **Project Design**

Since so little research has explored the dimension of religion and faith in organizational behavior, the project's first phase consists of in-depth, qualitative interviews with key informants in selected programs designed to develop grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) related to the project's research questions. In Phase I, the researchers selected a purposive sample of 16 organizations having "promising programs" in four urban communities. We have attempted to obtain maximum variation among all sites in the selection process along the dimensions of structure, funding source(s), and service population(s), and with special attention to racial diversity, degree of collaboration, degree of professionalization, stage of organizational development, and religious/faith orientation.

Given the emerging nature of the grounded theory design, research teams in the four urban areas are keeping methodological logs of their strategies for identifying programs and making other decisions. The research team developed interview guides that are being used with an average of five stakeholders in each program who represent the following perspectives: administrator, staff, service provider, service recipient, board member, and collaborator. The team is using the software package Atlas-Ti to analyze the transcribed interviews using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Weiss, 1994; O'Connor, 2002; Weiss, 1994.)

The findings of this first phase will be the foundation for a quantitative national survey designed to determine the extent to which the grounded theory that emerges in the project's first phase can be applied nationally across the diversity of faith-based social services in the United States. The Center for Faith and Service of the National Crime the Crime Prevention Council

(NCPC), Baylor's partner in this project, is disseminating the findings of this research through the creation of the Faith & Service Technical Education Network (FASTEN). The dissemination strategies include an interactive web site and a peer technical assistance network to facilitate mentoring among faith-based organizations and social service providers and to collect practical expertise on new issues that develop in the dynamic world of social services.

### **Research Challenges in Identifying Effective Practices**

This complex project has raised numerous questions in its design and implementation. Although many of those questions are common in research with organizations, some have been particularly salient or even unique to research with organizations that are faith-based. Four questions and how we have dealt with them follow.

#### **1. What should be the unit of analysis?**

Some faith-based organizations offer one service; these are the simplest organizations to study. For example, a Catholic agency in an inner city community provides a maternity high school for pregnant teenagers to encourage them to carry their babies to term and either to parent them or release them for adoption. Often, however, a single-service organization expands to offer ancillary services over time, originally to support to the "main" service of the agency, such as child care and parent education classes for girls after they deliver. Ancillary services often become full-fledged programs of the organization in their own right and multiply to develop a more comprehensive service package. For example, the educational program is augmented by foster home services for parenting teenagers and their babies, in-home counseling services to help young mothers to adjust to their new responsibilities, and a fatherhood program. Other faith-based organizations, such as congregations, may offer a multitude of non-social service programs (worship, religious education, etc.), to which the social service program is itself ancillary. Given this organizational complexity, determining the unit of analysis was an early

decision point for the project. It seemed that if we were studying the effectiveness of faith-based organizations in addressing the problems of urban poverty, then we needed to center our study in the programs themselves.

As logical as this decision seemed to be, it presented a whole array of other issues to consider. First, to conduct the depth of analysis grounded theory demands, we had to determine not only which organization, but also which program of the organization we would study. Second, programs may be the center of our study, but they must be studied in their organizational context. Often it is organizations, not individual programs, that collaborate with funders and with other social service providers. It is also the organization that negotiates funding, rather than a program unit. If there are multiple programs within the organization, and the organization is in collaboration with other organizations, somehow the study must tease out the benefits and contributions of the specific program being studied. When talking about an organization as context, the full range of tangible and intangible contributions that the organization provides comes into the picture, including factors such as reputation, networks of relationships, shared staffs, and interlocking boards. It is thus impossible to separate or to study a program apart from its organization. The difficulty is to recognize the complex and vast body of information about the organization that has relevance to the work of the program without losing the disciplined attention required to focus on the program itself.

## **2. What kinds of programs should be the focus of the project study?**

The original research questions concerned promising and effective practices in the delivery of social services by faith-based organizations. Since faith-based organizations are involved in virtually every kind of social service, in an attempt to make the project manageable, the focus was soon narrowed to those programs that address the challenges of urban poverty. Although programs addressing the challenges of urban poverty are not the whole universe of

social services, the project still seemed like a solar system in breadth. Even with this focus, several questions still had to be answered in sample selection.

a. *What is urban?* In the cultural milieu of Baylor University in Central Texas, urban seemed a clear-cut term: that which is not rural or small town. That is, we considered urban to refer to metropolitan areas; poverty has different characteristics and calls for different interventions in urban areas than in rural areas (Eitzen & Zinn, 2003, p. 186). Advisory board members from East Coast urban areas quickly informed us, however, that “urban poverty” is a politically laden term, referring to inner city African-American and Latino population groups. If we wanted to define the project more inclusively, and we do, then we would need to be careful in determining what our terminology communicates about the populations served by the programs we study.

b. *How would we define programs that address urban poverty and then choose those to study?* We were quickly confronted with the enormous range and diversity of relevant programs that directly address the problems of poverty directly (e.g. income insufficiency, lack of job skills and education, unemployment, and full-time employment at below-poverty wages). Urban poverty programs also address the results of urban poverty (e.g. inadequate housing, health problems, child abuse and neglect, teen pregnancy, family disintegration, family and community violence, crime, and substance abuse). Finally, relevant programs include (1) those that address problems after they occur, (2) those designed to prevent problems, and (3) those designed to advocate for social policies that will address social structural contributors to urban poverty.

Various fields of service have their own knowledge base and terminology, whether they are child welfare programs, substance abuse programs, job training programs, or literacy programs. Moreover, they have different units and levels of evaluation and, of course, different ways of defining effectiveness. We debated about how to obtain enough diversity in the

organizations we studied to be able to draw some conclusions about faith as a factor in social service delivery without thinning the depth of understanding we could glean from our work. Narrowing the focus of study meant we could have more confidence that we would develop a depth of understanding.

Rather than narrowing the project to one program within one field of service or a few “types” of programs along the above dimensions, we decided to focus on direct service programs defined as those that “assist clients, usually attempting to make their situations better in some way” (Netting & O’Connor, 2003, p. 11). This eliminated programs that focus only on staff development and training, community development, and advocacy, but do not directly serve individuals. Next, we decided to exclude programs that require highly professionalized staff, such as health care programs, maintaining our focus on “human service” programs. Therefore, we excluded health services, because of the highly professionalized expertise such programs require, and community development, because there are so many different components to community development that it would be difficult to select a direct service component to study. Even with these limitations, the project is straining to cover the above dimensions of program diversity.

Every decision to narrow the project carried its own consequences. For example, religious groups often provide services in one or a few areas. Muslims are particularly involved in providing health care services. The decision we made to exclude health care from the project based on professional medical expertise that is relatively unique in this field of practice meant that we severely limited our ability to study Muslim involvement in faith-based service programs.

c. *What makes a program “faith-based?”* It is not at all clear what the terms “faith” and “faith-based” mean for the study of organizations. In American culture, faith is most often a

characteristic of individuals, not of organizations. What makes an organization “faith-based?” It cannot always be determined by the name (Sacred Heart), or by the context (a congregation vs. a non-profit organization), or by location (a church basement vs. a public school auditorium). If it is not in these external variables of name or location or organizational type, then perhaps it is in the meaning given to the context by others. Who determines that meaning: the funders, administrators, service providers, recipients, or some combination of these?

In one of the earliest studies of religiously-affiliated organizations, Ellen Netting (1984) defined “church-related” organizations as those that meet five criteria: (1) public written acknowledgement of relationship with a parent religious body; (2) a board of directors composed either entirely or predominantly (at least over half) of denominational clergy and/or lay members; (3) some financial contribution from the parent religious body; (4) founding by either clergy or laypersons affiliated with the religious group; and (5) a specific constituency composed of religious members from whom the organization can solicit support ( p. 406). More recently, the Working Group on Human Needs and Faith-based and Community Initiatives has developed a complex typology for defining the faith characteristics of social service and educational organizations. The typology ranges from “faith-saturated” to “secular,” addressing such organizational factors as mission, the extent to which the purposes of the founder or founding group were religious, constitution of the board, the extent to which faith commitments are relevant and explicit in the selection of senior management and other staff, source of financial support and relationship to government, and whether or not it is a separate 501(c)(3) (Working Group on Human Needs and Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, 2002). We have chosen programs that represent a range of faith-saturated to secular organizational diversity. We will attempt to determine the extent to which current typologies represent the most significant dimensions for describing the religiosity of organizations and their programs.

### **3. What language is both appropriate across religious groups and professional disciplines that is still nuanced enough to be meaningful in understanding organizational behavior?**

The term “faith-based” reflects a Christian worldview; it is not as meaningful a term for other religious groups. Bob Wineburg has noted, for example, that it is not a relevant term for Jewish groups, who are instead “deed-based,” believing that the full expression of the divine is in the deed itself; the motivation of the doer is irrelevant (Bob Wineburg, personal communication, September 28, 2002). Similarly, religious affiliation or religiously related implies a relationship with a parent body and is insensitive to groups that are not separately incorporated (e.g. The Salvation Army; congregations) or organizations that do not consider themselves to be religiously affiliated (e.g. The Jewish Federation). “Religiously-affiliated” may be a more universally accepted term. We finally decided to ask respondents to tell us what they preferred to be called and if they considered themselves to be “faith-based” rather than assuming certain terms would fit with a particular organization or program. Given the religious diversity of our team, these linguistic challenges are ongoing and thus helpful in developing the interview protocols for the first phase of the project.

A second issue of language that confronted us was finding a common language terminology that worked across the disciplines of the research team, which include sociology, social work, and business. For example, the business researchers on our team define an “organization” as any unit of people, including the programs within a social service agency. The social workers and sociologists, on the other hand, define an organization as an agency/company/firm, and programs are considered subunits, not organizations. The term “institutional” means organizational to some team members, but refers to a broader industry-wide, extra-organizational concept for others. Using the same terms in different ways means

considerable conversation and interpersonal puzzlement before these differences reveal themselves as we work toward a shared project language.

As helpful as these discussions of language and terminology have been in developing the research design and tools, they have also made the project's initial work complex and potentially conflictual early in the life of a team new to working together. Consequently, much more time has been spent in lively conversations both in retreats that bring the national team together and in phone conference calls. The retreats have been particularly valuable for developing working relationships and commitment to one another and should be viewed as a critical funding and time line item in projects of this nature.

**4. How can we manage the complexity of our own research team's collaboration among three disciplines, and four organizations, and five programs? Can it suggest the complexity of issues involved in faith-based collaborations?**

The complexity of our research task required a highly and diversely skilled research team knowledgeable about and committed to increasing knowledge about faith-based organizations. Not only do we bring different languages and disciplines but also other different methodological skills, both quantitative and qualitative. Given the high level of commitment of the team to the project, every research team member wanted to be and is involved in both phases of the project, requiring steep learning curves for everyone in developing new skills relevant to the various dimensions of the project. For example, members of our team who have never done qualitative research are working side-by-side with others who have written textbooks on the subject.

Moreover, the four institutions that are home to this project bring very different expectations and constraints that have created some complex inter-university problems. For example, although each university has an Institutional Review Board (IRB) whose responsibility it is to insure that the well-being of research subjects is protected, each system functions

differently. Some are simply concerned for protecting human subjects, and others are heavily involved in critiquing the research methodology. A detailed review process took more than six months in one institution, significantly delaying the start of one arm of our research team. In contract negotiations, we have been surprised by institutional differences concerning the expectations for collaborating with other institutions (one university with another), ways of working with student research assistants, everyday working policies (e.g., travel and reimbursement), norms of working, and distribution of faculty workload. The experience a project director has in one institution may thus be surprisingly inadequate in predicting the time line and processes of a multi-institutional project. Project personnel management is a major task; this project includes the nine primary research partners, two full-time staff persons, several part-time staff persons, a pool of transcriptionists, and ten student assistants in masters and doctoral programs in the four institutions. We are managing the complexity by having “point people” in each site for various tasks.

We have decided to centralize everything and, although that eases some management concerns, it creates others. For example, all transcriptions are done at Baylor. This creates interesting challenges because of regional differences; the transcriptionists in Texas are typing conversations from Virginia, California, and Pennsylvania across a variety of cultural groups in each site. Accents, slang, and life experiences vary dramatically within and certainly across sites. Therefore, assuring the accuracy of transcriptions is a highly time-consuming process. Finally, our past experiences and expertise are both resources and sources of potential conflict. Several of us had studied very different aspects of faith-based social services and thus had very different perceptions of the issues before us. One member had worked primarily at the state level and with non-Christian groups; another had worked with Christian denominational organizations serving senior adults; another with congregations and their family service

programs, another with workforce development, and another with community-based feeding programs.

Our struggles have been our strength. In identifying effective practices in urban faith-based social service programs, the research team represents a microcosm, in many respects, of the complexity of the religiously-affiliated organizations and their programs we are studying. It has been critical for us to struggle through these methodological issues. We hope that what we are learning will, in turn, be a resource for others who are studying the religious dimension of social services and who are engaged in multi-university, multi-method experiences.

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