

Partnership in Practice

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In 1983, Fresno, California, was named the "least livable" American city. It had a very high crime rate, unemployment was in the double digits, and the city schools were struggling to handle the stresses and racial tensions of the cultural melting pot that Fresno had become (ninety different languages are spoken there). The city had 125 active youth gangs. It was a real mess.

Today, there are partnerships between congregations and the major hospitals, between clergy and cops, between churches and public schools, between faith-based organizations (FBOs) and Fresno County government. Some of these partnerships and collaborations have led to decreases in crime (one of the programs involves churches renting apartments in high-crime public housing projects and converting them into community centers); to neighborhood revitalization and affordable housing development initiatives; to an increase in the number of mentors available to at-risk kids; to an innovative, peer-to-peer mentoring program that matches former welfare recipients with current welfare recipients.

Hundreds of people have been helped in making the transition from welfare to work; hundreds of at-risk youth have been matched with mentors and are now participating in all kinds of positive recreational programs that have contributed to a drop-in youth recidivism; some sixty-two churches have received training that has helped them to launch 4,100 volunteers out into Fresno for community service of many different kinds.

So how did this happen? It began with a few pastors from a variety of churches who came together for a prayer retreat. Those prayer meetings continue today.

The collaborative efforts born in Fresno have led to documented improvements in living conditions in the city, and Fresno was recognized by the National Civic League as the "All-America City of 2000."

Scope and Scale

Obviously, faith communities have made a significant difference in Fresno. And the story there is being repeated elsewhere. The best current data we have concerning the community outreach activities of religious congregations comes from the Hartford Seminary's Faith Communities Today survey (<http://www.fact.hartsem.edu>). A massive undertaking, this survey examined 14,000 congregations of diverse faith groups (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and others). The survey revealed that 85 percent of these congregations provide at least one community service. Most common are relief/benevolence activities: providing food, money, clothing, or emergency shelter. But many congregations are involved in much more extensive social-service efforts. Over half of the congregations are engaged in providing health-care services, and one third are involved in tutoring children, ministering in prisons, offering substance-abuse programs, or providing housing for the elderly.

The Hartford study's findings are more or less in accord with those of University of Pennsylvania professor Ram Cnaan's ambitious and in-depth survey work. (See Ram Cnaan, *The New Deal: Social Work and Religion in Partnership*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.) Cnaan's data suggest even more congregations are active in community outreach. His study estimates that 92 percent offer at least one social service. He also estimates that one third of all daycare programs in America are housed in religious buildings, and that congregations spend some \$36 billion annually on social services.

Andrew Billingsley's investigation of the social impact of African-American congregations shows them vigorously engaged in community-serving programs. In various regional samples of hundreds of such churches, Billingsley regularly found that nearly 70 percent of black congregations are involved in outreach. (See Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform*, New York: Oxford University Press, 199, 1999.) My own recent investigations of the outreach conducted by over 450 Hispanic congregations came to similar conclusions: 73 percent offered social services for community residents. (See Amy L. Sherman, "The Community Serving Activities of Hispanic Protestant Congregations," co-published by Hudson Institute Faith in Communities and the Center for the Study of Latino Religion at the University of Notre Dame," December 2003.)

While we know much about religious congregations' efforts in investing in community social services, there have been fewer studies on the contributions made by faith-based nonprofit organizations. In 1985, the Council on Foundations published a study indicating that faith-based nonprofits spent between \$7.5 and \$8 billion annually on social services—not including religious hospitals, orphanages, or adoption agencies. (See Cnaan, *The Newer Deal*, 180-181.) Literally tens of millions of poor people are helped annually by faith-based charities.

Government and Faith

Since the passage of federal welfare reforms in 1996, greater attention has been focused on the role that faith-based organizations play in addressing social ills. In our country, there has been a long history of government collaboration with religiously affiliated nonprofit social service agencies. Government funds have supported such agencies as the YMCA and Catholic Charities and the Salvation Army. But there is something new that is happening now, post-welfare reform.

The 1996 federal welfare reforms included a provision known as Charitable Choice(CC). Charitable Choice refers to a new series of guidelines for regulating financial relationships between government entities and faith-based social service providers.

The CC rules outlaw discrimination against FBOs in competition for government grants and contracts and provide new rights to FBOs that partner with government. These include the right to control their governing board, the right to maintain a religious atmosphere in their facilities, and the right to select staff in accord with their religious faith. The new rules also emphasize the civil liberties of clients: government is required to provide a secular alternative to a client who does not wish to receive services from an FBO, and FBOs cannot force clients to participate in mandatory religious activities. The CC rules do not regulate *all* contracts between FBOs and the government, however; only certain streams of federal funding, most notably the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, are regulated by the CC rules.

Charitable Choice has begun to change the landscape of state-FBO partnerships in America. Most important, CC has broadened the social safety net as FBOs without a previous history of formal collaboration with government are now competing for and winning government contracts to provide social services. Hudson Institute has conducted two national studies of CC implementation; in the most recent one, which included fifteen states, we found over 700 examples of financial collaborations between government and FBOs that totaled nearly \$124 million. Fully 56 percent of the FBO contractors had never partnered officially with government before.

The collaborations are running smoothly. Over 90 percent of the FBOs said they were satisfied in their relationship with government and the vast majority had adopted a number of intentional, deliberate strategies that assured that client rights were protected. So there is more collaboration, and new forms of collaboration, happening now, post-welfare reform, than there was previously. Some of the common types of social services that congregations and FBOs are providing under government contracts include mentoring, job training, transportation, and youth services.

Collaboration and Contributions

President George W. Bush, of course, has championed this expanded collaboration between government and faith-based organizations and has frequently lauded the contributions FBOs make to solving social ills. He has created a White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives as well as cabinet-level offices in several U.S. agencies, including Health and Human Services, Labor, Education, and Housing and Urban Development. These offices are charged with the responsibility to review federal regulations and eliminate barriers and discriminatory policies harming FBOs and small community-based organizations, as well as to reach out to FBOs to make them aware of government contracting opportunities.

The President's actions on behalf of his faith-based initiative have had a two-fold impact: On the one hand, his policies have created new opportunities for FBOs and have contributed to the growth of government-faith collaboration. On the other hand, his attention has focused the media's attention on the issue, and has engendered significant opposition from individuals and groups in the United States who argue that the faith-based initiative is an unconstitutional breach of the separation of church and state.

There are three key reasons why the increased enthusiasm for FBOs and their role in transforming broken communities is significant.

The first is that this trend is creating more choices for disadvantaged people. Some of the poor are people of faith, and in some locations, they now have better access to faith-based programs.

The second is that by working with FBOs, public and private entities may be gaining access to hard-to-reach populations. In some ethnic communities, FBOs are trusted, credible intermediaries with other civic institutions. This means that police departments, juvenile courts, or housing authorities that wish to gain better access may be able to accomplish that by partnering with FBOs.

Third, government is discovering that partnerships with FBOs can connect them to untapped human resources in a community. For example, many local social welfare agencies are now partnering with churches to provide mentoring to families affected by welfare reform. Many a harassed and overworked caseworker is now finding that her clients can receive a lot of practical and emotional support from community volunteers mobilized by churches. Similarly, in several cities across the United States, mayors are running special initiatives in which adult mentors are recruited from congregations to support children of prisoners or youth in the juvenile probation system.

From the practitioners' standpoint, today's reality in the United States is that we are seeing a positive trend, toward less discrimination against FBOs and toward an increasing respect for the strategic and valuable role that FBOs play in promoting healthier neighborhoods. And that's a good thing.

This essay is adapted from remarks Sherman gave during the seventh annual Heartland Symposium, held in Indianapolis.