

Faith And Service Technical Education Network¹

Literature Snapshot

When the Service Delivery System is a Congregation

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Target Audience: Congregational leaders and those leaders in social service agencies who work collaboratively with congregations

Congregations often are the only voluntary organizations to which the poorest persons in our society have access, including access to opportunities to develop leadership skills such as chairing a meeting, speaking in public, and expressing their opinions in a public forum. Congregations benefit their communities by providing meeting spaces, vans for transportation, bulletin boards, copying machines, public address systems, and ways for mobilizing and strengthening a community (Ammerman, 1999). Most congregations also offer one or more social service programs. Congregations differ in significant ways from social service agencies, however. Those who plan, lead, and/or work collaboratively with congregations who provide social services need to understand these differences so that they can build on the strengths and characteristics of congregations.

1. Congregations are host settings for social services.

Host settings are those that have purposes other than or beyond providing social services. The social services they provide are ways to achieve a broader mission. For example, hospitals and schools are not primarily social service agencies, but their purposes--treating illness and educating students-- are furthered by providing social services to their patients/students. Hospitals use social workers to help plan for care after a patient leaves the hospital, or to help families deal with the crises of difficult diagnoses and with making care plans. Schools use social workers to address family and community factors that keep children from succeeding in school. In contrast, in a *primary setting* for social services, a public or private service agency, social services are the central reason for existence, the mission of the organization.

If social service leaders in a host setting forget that they are there to help the organization achieve its primary goals, and instead try to transform the setting into a *primary* social service setting, they will be less effective over time and the host setting may even withdraw the social service. A school social worker, for example, may provide needed support to children experiencing the divorce of parents. If a weekly group for these children is scheduled during the math or reading lessons, however, the school may well let the social worker know that the support services must flex around the primary tasks of education.

Leaders of congregational social service programs need to understand how those programs relate to the primary mission of the congregation, and congregations differ in their understanding of that relationship (Garland, Hugen, et al., 2002; Unruh, 1999). In Jewish traditions, acts of justice and service to others are considered divine commandments; to be obedient requires service (Roehlkepartain, Naftali, & Musegades, 2000). Christianity emphasizes that acts of serving are ways of thanking God for unmerited grace and a way of responding to God's love. Some Christian groups emphasize giving to the poor as an outward sign of salvation or a way to share

God's love and grace with unbelievers. Others emphasize that service is a means of discipleship, of learning and living the ways of God. Sadakat, a tradition in Islam, is a personal, voluntary form of giving aimed at helping the poor "as a way to be near God" (Kandil, 1995). To be most effective, the planning and sustaining of congregational involvement in social services must directly relate to these theological motivations for service.

Implications

- Explore the theological motivations for social service in the congregation(s) with whom you are working. These motivations may be multiple and complex; a congregational leader may have one understanding of why the congregation should serve, and members may have other understandings.
- Find ways to respect and build on these motivations. If service is a way of thanking God, then find ways for the congregation (or congregational volunteers in the social service program) to put words as well as actions to that thanksgiving in prayer and worship, whether or not that prayer and worship invites service recipients to participate. If service is a way of learning the ways of God, consider providing a study group for volunteers to reflect on and discuss holy texts and religious teachings that relate to service.

2. American congregations are voluntary organizations.

Particularly in American society, congregational membership and participation is voluntary. If people do not like what is happening in one congregation, they simply move to another, or stop participating altogether. In some Christian Protestant denominations, even congregational participation in the denomination is voluntary. If the congregation does not like what the denomination is doing, it may choose to withdraw and to affiliate with another denomination, to remain independent, or simply to withhold its financial support from the denomination. Maintaining motivation, dealing with conflict, and maintaining interpersonal relationships therefore have much greater import for social service professionals in congregations than in other settings—otherwise, congregations and volunteers may simply quit when they become overwhelmed or discouraged or lose a vision for what they are doing.

Unfortunately, sometimes community leaders, pressed by the weight of community needs, treat congregations as social utilities, taking their resources of money for emergency assistance, or volunteers for their social service programs, without attending to the impact on the congregation itself. The focus is on getting needed help in the social service program, rather than the reverse--helping the congregation achieve its mission. The money is spent, but the congregation may feel little connection with what happened to the money, and members become discouraged that their little bit makes so little difference in a sea of need. Volunteers find the work hard and do not connect that serving the needs of others is a fulfillment of their religious beliefs, regardless of the response. The harassed social service professional may have no time or understanding of how to work with the volunteers, to pray or worship with them, to connect what they are doing with their spiritual lives. As a consequence, the congregation's resources are diminished rather than nurtured. As for the social services professionals, there may be a growing resentment over time as the church loses its interest in being involved and the resources dry up. To ask people to volunteer as an expression of their faith is to ask them to bring their gifts, their personal attributes as individuals and as believers, to that work. That requires a very different approach than with employees in designing and defining the work to be done (Garland, 2002; see *Research Briefs from Related Projects* "Faith and Service Connection").

Implications:

- Keep returning to assess evolving theological and other motivations for a congregation and volunteers to continue involvement in social services.
- The nurture of congregational and volunteer involvement requires as much time and expertise from social service professionals as providing direct services to recipients, but work with a congregation and its volunteers may not be as readily evaluated and reported as direct services to clients. Find ways to recognize and evaluate work with volunteers as professional service.
- Seek training and resources for developing skills for leading and nurturing congregational and volunteer involvement in social service programs. If you are a professional social service provider, consider taking or auditing courses in practical theology from a seminary or reading about congregational leadership particular to the religious faith of the congregations with whom you are working. Congregational leaders can recommend resources to you and will be pleased that you want to learn more about their faith in order to work more effectively with them.

3. Congregations are *social communities*.

A *community* is the set of personal contacts through which persons and families receive and give emotional and interpersonal support and nurture, material aid and services, information, and new social contacts. The people in a community know us. They are people we can borrow from or who will take care a child in an emergency. They are the ones from whom we can obtain news and gossip so that we know the significant and not so significant information that gives shape to our lives. *All* persons, both children and adults, need community. Because children are so dependent on others for their survival, their vulnerability in the absence of community is more apparent. Adults, too, however, need to live in and experience community, although some seem to need community more than others. Even self-sufficient adults seek the company of others and need community when they become ill, injured, or feel threatened. In our world of increasing independence and loss of meaningful residential communities, of more adults living alone and more children in single-parent households, congregations can be community for people in a way that social service agencies can never be. “Community” is probably the most significant resource that congregations offer to the needs in our country.

One of the great errors in policymaking is the false assumption that systems can produce care. Care resides in the domain of communities (McKnight, 1997). Whatever the social services that congregations provide, they need to build on—and strengthen—that community. The social services a congregation provides need to build and strengthen the community itself. Because they are communities and not agencies, the leaders of the programs of the congregations need to be active members—a part of the community in every sense.

Implications

- The leader of a congregation’s social service programs or involvement in other social service programs needs to be a member of the congregation. Social service agencies need to find and relate to a congregational leader, whether volunteer or paid staff, rather than attempting to provide direct leadership if they are not a member of the congregation.
- Congregations do best at social services that build on their strengths as a community—mentoring, tutoring, support groups, other programs that emphasize the informal relationships between people rather than professional-client relationships.

- Find ways that the social service program contributes to the strength of the congregational community. Find ways to introduce recipients to congregational members, to tell the stories of the impact of the social service program to the congregation, and for social service recipients to contribute as volunteers alongside congregational members to the community.

4. Congregations *spin off* programs and services to their societal context.

Sometimes congregations start ministries that take on a life of their own, outgrowing the congregation where they began. For example, All Saints Church in Los Angeles began an AIDS ministry before any programs for AIDS patients and their families existed. Over time, they were able to obtain funding from government and private sources outside the congregation. Volunteers began working with the AIDS ministry from outside the congregation. The program grew and became incorporated separately, and then became independent of the church. Ed Bacon, Rector of All Saints, has pointed out that when the congregation gives birth to a ministry, then successfully calls on society to support that ministry, and finally the ministry is secularized and integrated into society, then the congregation has facilitated social transformation (Bacon, personal communication, 1996). Many of the child welfare agencies in this nation began through volunteer organizations of churchwomen. Over time they hired professional staff and became increasingly independent of the birthing church (Garland, 1994).

Implications

- If a congregation's social service program faces the possibility of incorporation as a separate entity, congregational leaders should facilitate a process of congregational discernment about the mission of the congregation and the theological and practical reasons for either retaining the program as a part of the congregation or launching it as a separate entity.
- Because congregations are often more communities than they are formal organizations, this process of discernment may be one that proceeds slowly over time, attempting to reach consensus insofar as possible. Organizations often reach these decisions much more quickly, controlled by a less complex set of motivations and less need for community consensus. Allow time for the various groups in the congregation to be included in this decision-making process.
- Recognize that become a separate organization has both problems as well as advantages. The "right" decision is the one that fits the complexity of motivations, community needs, and resources in a particular situation.

5. Congregations can be effective advocates for social justice.

Congregations can serve as a conscience of the community and address the structural causes of human distress, which are often rooted in economic policies and processes, in inequalities of power and resources, and in racism and bigotry (Aspen Institute Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group, 2002). One of the most challenging tasks for congregational leaders is to guide their congregations from social service to challenging the social forces that create the very problems of those they serve. By developing relationships with persons who have experienced oppression and

poverty in service programs where they volunteer, congregational members can develop a deeper awareness and concern about social injustices. In a society in which the gap between rich and poor is increasingly widening, congregational leaders need to be actively encouraging a hunger and then a voice for social justice. For example, Jesus Christ reiterated the Jewish teaching of Jubilee central to his mission and identity. Jubilee is a concept of economic redistribution to be sure that every family has the land and resources they need to sustain themselves (Leviticus 25). The concept of Christian salvation includes not only deliverance from individual sin but also economic and social well-being for the poor and downtrodden of the world (Campolo, 1990). In Jewish traditions, *tzedakah* (acts of justice) is considered obligatory (Shapiro, 1997).

Nevertheless, congregations are often reluctant to engage in advocacy for social justice. In a study of 32 congregations, Bobo and Tom (1996) identified five reasons:

- (1) They prefer to develop their ministries in terms of people they want to serve rather than issues or social problems. That is, they are focused on relationships with people rather than social institutions or problems.
- (2) Some congregations are out of touch with the community; they study the issues but do not include persons they want to serve in their attempt to address the issues.
- (3) They don't believe they can really make a difference.
- (4) They are uncomfortable discussing and using power.
- (5) They tend to be ignorant of their religion's theology and teachings about justice.

Implications

- Identify the social issues at local, state, and national levels that are contributing to the problems of urban poverty a congregation is addressing in its social service programs, and help the congregation to see these connections.
- Explore through homilies and religious education the theological foundations for a congregation's involvement in advocacy for social justice, and relate those foundations to the actual social injustices a congregation confronts in its service to the community.
- Identify ways that congregational members can be involved in advocacy in concerted ways so that members experience the efficacy that comes from joining collaboratively with others to attempt social change.

6. Churches are *cultural groups*.

Congregations have their own language, nonverbal symbols, norms, and patterns of relationships. They have historical identities that shape their current understanding of themselves. These identities reflect not only an overarching religious heritage but also the unique histories of a particular congregation. Like families, congregations develop over time, going through organizational stages that partially shape their current life together (Moberg, 1984; Carroll, Dudley, & McKinney, 1986; Garland, 1994). Effective leaders operate within and use the language and cultural patterns of the church community. Knowledge of holy texts, the religious group's theology and teachings, and some knowledge of religious history provide keys to understanding and working effectively in this context. For example, in many Christian groups, the concepts of the "family of God" and Christian hospitality provide the ground for social action in behalf of homeless and isolated persons and social ministry programs that attempt to include them in the community. Teachings on the value and role of children provide impetus for child welfare services and child advocacy. Understanding these distinctive characteristics of the

religious context is just as important for effective professional practice as is understanding the culture, history, and current life experiences of an ethnic family requesting family services.

Often, not only commonalities but also basic conflicts exist between the values and knowledge of the social service professions and a congregation's beliefs and practices. For example, researchers have found basic conflicts between professional values and fundamentalist Christian doctrines (Midgley & Sanzenbach, 1989), and between the worldviews of social workers and evangelical Christians (Hodge 2003). Different understanding of family relationships, gender roles, and effective child discipline are a few examples of the many places where professionals may differ in their perspectives from many conservative religious groups.

Implications

- Every host setting creates conflicts between professional values and practices and those values and practices of the setting. The social service professional needs to be alert for and sensitive to how these conflicts can be addressed most effectively for the sake of the service recipients and for the congregation itself.
- The leader who is a member and/or leader of the congregation may use the conflict as an opportunity for the congregation to examine its beliefs and practices in response to the realities they meet in the lives of recipients. Because of the voluntary, community characteristics of a congregation, these kinds of opportunities also may lead to divisiveness and splintering, and not necessarily to change unless sufficient respect for differences is present and communicated.

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