Delivering Social Services through Faith-Based Organizations: Case of United Way of Massachusetts Bay

Kevin Peterson
United Way of Massachusetts Bay

Delivering Social Services through Faith-Based Organizations: *Case of the United Way of Massachusetts Bay*

Kevin Peterson

Abstract

As deliverers of social services, faith-based organizations have been stereotyped as being inefficient and focused on spiritual outcomes alone, and have therefore been largely ignored by funding agencies. The United Way of Massachusetts Bay, realizing the importance of such organizations, particularly in communities of color, has actively sought to dispel these stereotypes and work with faith-based organizations to enhance service delivery to needy Black communities in Massachusetts. Through training and participatory research, faith-based organizations have begun to appreciate the importance of measurable outcomes.

President George W. Bush and the Armies of Compassion

At the very beginning of his administration in 2001, President George W. Bush pledged to advance the utilization of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the delivery of social services. As the government continues to assist and serve the needy, particularly black communities located in urban centers, Bush promised that faith based

organizations would play a larger role towards achieving this end. Eschewing historical practices that had sought to cleanly separate "church" from the "state" President Bush sought an aggressive and unprecedented public policy position with regard to engaging faith-based institutions. In doing so, Bush revived the debate relative to the potential impact faith based agencies can make in the national effort of caring for the poor and the needy.

The administration's agenda, in this regard, was straightforward. It based its conclusions on a number of growing programs that were proving successful in communities across the country including cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and Houston.

Prevailing assumptions and deliverables with regard to the efficacy of FBOs are:

1.   Faith-based organizations can deliver social services products at a level equal to secular organization;

2.   Faith-based organizations are capable of delivering services that are measurable through industry standard evaluative instruments;

3.   Faith-based agencies can effectively deliver social service products without engaging is proselytizing and/or delving into spiritually "salvific" activities.

President Bush is clear about his administration's objectives and the possibilities that will result from supporting and funding faith-based organizations as a national strategy towards aiding the poor and the needy. In a statement announcing the signing of executive orders creating the White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, Bush said:[1]

It is one of the great goals of my administration to invigorate the spirit of involvement and citizenship. We will encourage faith-based and community programs without changing their mission. We will help all in their work to change hearts while

---

[1] Excerpt from speech delivered by President Bush at the White House on January 29, 2001.

keeping a commitment to pluralism. I approach this goal with some basic principles: Government has important responsibilities for public health or public order and civil rights. Yet government -- and government will never be replaced by charities and community groups.[sic] Yet when we see social needs in America, my administration will look first to faith-based programs and community groups, which have proven their power to save and change lives. We will not fund the religious activities of any group, but when people of faith provide social services, we will not discriminate against them. As long as there are secular alternatives, faith-based charities should be able to compete for funding on an equal basis, and in a manner that does not cause them to sacrifice their mission. And we will make sure that help goes to large organizations and to small ones as well.

More than 30 million dollars has been distributed throughout various federal level cabinet secretaries. Most of this funding has been funneled through the Department of Health and Human Services. But in coming years, it is anticipated that funding will be available from a range of sources, including the Department of Defense, Transportation and Energy.

In 2002, the United Way of Massachusetts was awarded a $2 million dollar grant to facilitate its collaboration with two faith-based organizations serving inner city constituents in Massachusetts. With the Boston Ten Point Coalition, a nationally recognized youth anti-violence project and the Emmanuel Gospel Center, an inner city religious mission, the collaborative seeks to expressly support faith-based organizations servicing the poor and needy in the inner city. While federal rules prohibit the collaborative from discriminating against secular efforts, most organizations funded so far have been faith-based.

This case study is an examination of the model utilized by the United Way of Massachusetts Bay based in Boston, in helping faith-based organizations accept the evaluation of their social programs.

The Faith Based Movement and the African-American Church

With African-American communities requiring a sizeable amount of assistance from public agencies, the black church is poised to play a larger role in the continued service of its followers. By taking advantage of a policy focusing on building administrative and program capacity of urban-based faith efforts seeking to addressing service needs, the black church is uniquely positioned to substantively alter the nature of charity based services within communities that have historically been aided by secular institutions such as multi-service centers, public school-based academic programs, and government funded health centers.

The black church has historically functioned as a community resource, serving the needs of its congregation and providing care and services for both parishioners and secular laypersons seeking food, shelter or financial assistance. To be sure, from the slavery era, the black church has exhibited philanthropic tendencies that have extended beyond its primary mission of soul-saving and spiritual refuge. While religious rituals have been the fundamental offering by the black religious institutions, the African-American church has played a role in such social and political activities as emancipating slaves, engaging in public policy formulation, and advocacy during the Civil Rights era. More recently, the black church has engaged in services such as operating soup kitchens, childcare centers, and job training programs.

Like many faith-based organizations, however, the black church has focused most of its social outreach ministries primarily in the area of service provision. Because the efforts of the black church were focused mainly in the area of serving those in need, interest in documenting program effectiveness has been minimal. Moreover, because many black church social service projects were relatively small and led mainly by church-based volunteers, organizational

capacity has been devoted mostly toward program delivery concerns, not program evaluation.

Service Provision Among Black Faith-Based Initiatives

In general, faith-based projects emanating from African-American religious sources are small and informal. They usually feature an after school or pre-school site that provides care for young people whose parents are working or incapable of providing the needed services. These projects are characterize in the following ways:

Faith Vision Oriented

The faith-based projects are generally the vision of the church or religious organization offering the services. Non-church members do not request such services. The service is usually a reflection of how religious leadership has responded to observable needs in the congregation and the community. In the three examples cited below, each project founded has reported that broad community need was their reason for engaging in community service provision.

Faith-based Projects Start Small

African-American faith-based initiatives usually begin on a small scale. With an interest in initially serving congregation-based youth, the cited programs began serving a discrete group of youth. The average size of youth served ranged from 15 to 25 participants. The budget of the majority of the Faith in Action programs was less than $250,000. Staff capacity often limited the number of program participants.

Volunteer Directed

Volunteer staff members who are primarily faith leaders direct the faith initiatives. Staff members in many cases are not trained as program directors in the field of youth services. Most of the experience faith leaders have with youth are gained in the context of church service or rituals.

Faith in Action: The Boston Faith Miracle

The United Way of Massachusetts Bay's Faith in Action Initiative precedes the national model established by President Bush in 2001. The local initiative has its origin in the United Way's decision to invest youth funding in the Mattapan community in Boston.

The initial funding for the Faith in Action initiative was granted in 1996. The modest grant was made to the Mattapan-Dorchester Churches in Action project, which was already providing services to youth. The grassroots project organized churches in the mostly black and Afro-Caribbean communities of Boston's Mattapan and Dorchester neighborhoods. By organizing church members as volunteers to reach out and mentor youth, the group effectively combined a faith vision with programs that rescued young people from at-risk behaviors. The initiative registered success, which led the United Way to wonder whether faith-based organizations could be as effective as their secular counterparts. Could faith-based service providers effectively deliver services without insisting on spiritual conversion? Moreover, could faith-based organizations--which have been perceived as mostly small and informal--become sophisticated enough to predict program successes and formally measure them?

The initial grant soon evolved into a full-fledged United Way investment strategy towards providing difficult-to-reach youth with needed services such as after-school academic support, mentoring, and leadership development.

In the span of 6 years approximately 28 faith-based organizations have been funded with grants totaling approximately 2 million dollars. With the recently awarded Compassion Capital Fund grant funded through the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, the United Way and its partners will increase its funding in this area by more that 4 million in the next 3 years.

The religious profile of the agencies receiving funding through the Faith in Action Initiative has been somewhat static, consisting mainly of Protestant organizations with Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Pentecostal religious traditions. In recent years the Faith in Action portfolio of grantees has diversified, with a Buddhist tradition added.

As of 2002, the last year of funding, a majority of the faith-based organizations served youth in academically focused after-school programs. A smaller percentage provided mentoring services to at-risk youth. An even smaller cluster of grantees served youth on cultural and leadership issues.

The Importance of FBOs in the United Way Effort to Service the Needy

As a part of its mission, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay directs millions of dollars annually to serve young people at varying levels of need and/or distress. Substantive funding is invested in after-school projects that focus on academic support, mentoring and leadership development. Yet, many youth were not being served. The main reason for this was that some youth were not accustomed to accessing the traditional social service "portal" by way of visiting a community-based agency or using such systems as schools or associate networks as conduits.

The Significance of the Approach and Faith Criteria

In the late 1990's very few Boston-based foundations were investing significant amounts of funding in faith-based organizations. While such organizations were viewed as laudable charitable efforts, few philanthropies, including the United Way, deemed faith-based efforts as sufficiently professionalized to carry out the critical work of delivering social services.

Concerns about the effectiveness regarding FBOs were centered on three central issues, which reflect three stereotypes about FBOs. These stereotypes have historically precluded FBOs from foundation and federal funding.

Stereotype 1: Faith-based organizations have, as their fundamental priority, to proselytize. That is, there has been a dominant perception that church-based missions "serve" in order to "save."

Stereotype 2: Faith-based organizations are administratively inefficient. There is a widespread belief, notwithstanding the superior services provided by faith-based organizations such as the Salvation Army, that religious organizations lack the capacity to monitor organization functions, evaluate programs or ensure fiscal solvency.

Stereotype 3: Faith-based organizations are only focused on predicting, measuring and monitoring spiritual outcomes, i.e., ethical or spiritual trajectories take precedent over secular changes in habits, deeds or attitudes structures.

Seeking to Dispel FBOs's Stereotypes

In seeking to effectively invest in FBOs the United Way's Faith in Action Initiative sought to either dispel or "work around" these misconceptions. In exploring funding relationships with FBOs it was noted that prevailing stereotypes about faith-based organization were not entirely valid.

To respond to these challenges and concerns, the United Way sought a funding approach that respected the need of faith-based organization to express faith while demanding high social service verification standards. To this end, funded agencies were asked to identify "easily" measurable outcomes for its program participants. Invariably, the initial cluster of 12 agencies chose outcomes that were secular in nature. An example of such a measurable outcome was:

"Young people will increase reading skills and analysis abilities after three months."

While these outcomes were allowed to be pursued in a religious context (in a church, synagogue or in the presence of sacred iconography), the standards of rigorous justification and program verification were maintained.

A United Way review of its initiative and the specific "outcomes measurement" model it pursued is documented in a recently published overview of the project:[2]

As a means of moving faith-based institutions towards high program evaluation standard: The United Way contracted with Dr. Victoria Lee Erickson who served as the principal researcher. Erickson is the University Chaplain and Associate Professor of Sociology of Religion at the Caperson School of Graduate

---

[2] United Way of Massachusetts Bay. 2003. *"Faith and Action", Improving the Lives of At-Risk Youth, Final Report*, pp. 6-7.

Studies, and associate Professor of Religion at Drew University. She, and others, spent the first year getting programs comfortable with the idea of evaluation and outcome measurement. They introduced the logic model [a sequence of predicting program results]; facilitated discussions about indicators and outcomes; outputs and long-term outcomes, and more. They help groups think about their programs from an outcome measurement perspective, complete forms and track results. Erickson contracted with the Boston TenPoint Coalition to provide outcome measurement training to 15 of the agencies taking part in the Faith in Action Initiative.

This work by Dr. Erickson was enhanced by storytelling exercises that increased the capacity of faith-based agencies to predict and communicate outcomes.

The Initial Response by FBOs

Faith-based organizations were not ready for outcome measurement training. Many of the grantees believed that they were not capable of performing such a task. Additionally, they believed that measuring outcomes was not their priority concern. Many simply believed that "being there" for the youth was the program's main objective.

After being introduced to the outcome measurement instrument, many found the tool useful and an added value to the services they were providing. Grantees stated that the outcome measurement tools allowed them to better focus their programs, record and report successes and identify more beneficial outcomes for the youth they were serving.

In the course of three years, each of the grantees had adopted a measurement system for at least one of their programs. The models were so well received among some the Faith in Action grantees that

they used the tool to measure against other programs. Bruce Wall Ministries, one of the grantees, adapted readily to the outcome measurements and became a leading advocate among other grantees. Karin Wall, a program director with the Bruce Walls Ministries now provides program evaluation training to local and national faith based organization

The Funding Model

To fit the unique needs and orientation of faith-based organizations, the United Way developed funding criteria that honored the mission of the faith-based organization while also addressing its aim of providing and evaluating service delivery to the needy.

The resulting criteria combined existing funding standards used against secular grantees with two additional criteria: Youth and Spirituality. As the United Way evaluated the effectiveness of the faith organizations, each component of the funding criteria, with emphasis weighted toward three categories: Youth, Spiritual Development and Management and Governance. The United Way was interested in a number of fundamental questions: First, how were these faith institutions or faith-based projects reaching a previously "unreachable" sub-sector of young people? What unique strategies were they employing to attract the attention that secular agencies were incapable of using? How was the language and context of faith effective in ways that traditional human service practices were neither relevant nor convincing strategies?

Second, how were the granted faith institutions looking at the issue of spirituality with regard to serving the needs of young people accessing the services? Was faith the primary motivation for providing service and was spiritual conversion the ultimate intended result of their interaction with at-risk youth?

Third, how capable were faith-based institutions? Did they have staff sufficiently educated and sophisticated to understand outcomes training? If their overriding rationale for providing services was based in religious missions, were they interested in identifying outcomes that could be objectified and counted? Would staff of these projects consider anything different from "spiritual" outcomes important?

Below are the final funding criteria:

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT
- Program content includes emphasis on spiritual development
- Program content includes emphasis on constructive behavior, positive thinking, personal self development, and civic responsibility
- Program content contributes to individual development and maturity

YOUTH OUTREACH
- Emphasis on engaging and involving youth outside the membership of the congregation or faith membership
- Program content promotes respect for and appreciation of other religions and respect for diversity
- Program participation is inclusive with regard to race, religion, ethnicity, culture and gender

GREATEST NEEDS
- Focuses on youth and communities with limited access to resources
- Documents gaps between community need and resources
- Demonstrates financial need of populations served

MANAGEMENT & GOVERNANCE
- Demonstrates effective/efficient human resource and financial management
- Has strong and diverse leadership
- Demonstrates vision

OUTCOMES
- Clearly delineates proposed outcomes for youth
- Demonstrates how program goals are related to desired outcomes
- Ensures youth/community voice in development of program planning
- Has developed tools to measure outcomes for participants
- Demonstrates significant benefits for youth and/or in the overall life of the community

SOURCES OF FUNDING / RELATIVE FINANCIAL NEED
- Institution demonstrates financial need and appropriately seeks other resources (i.e., diversified funding base)
- Request is less than 50% of current program budget
- Institution has reasonable plan for continuance of program in absence of ongoing United Way funding

CAPACITY BUILDING
- Institution serves as a family focused community resource with demonstrated support from community members
- Focuses on self-sufficiency and helping individuals help themselves; uses peer support and self-help models
- Values the diversity of the community and promotes inclusiveness
- Builds leadership among youth and community residents
- Involves youth and community members in decision making and prioritizing
- Seeks opportunities to promote both short-term and long-term systemic change

COLLABORATION AND INTEGRATION OF SERVICES
- Partners with other community groups and faith based organizations through joint programming, coalitions, collaborations, etc.
- Coordinates services within the institution to address participant needs and to manage resources

VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT
- Volunteerism is an integral part of how the faith based social ministry program meets its mission
- Involves volunteers appropriately and leverages their cost-effectiveness
- Views volunteer involvement as a community building strategy and actively seeks volunteers reflective of the community served
- Encourages leadership development of volunteers and offers opportunities for growth

The Outcomes Measurement Experience

The outcome measurement experience has been positive, with a majority of agencies saying that such measurement practices do not conflict with its faith traditions or perspectives.

Each of the grantees were introduced to the concept of identifying what outcomes would constitute a level of success for program participants at the end of the cycle of services provided to them. Upon identifying an outcome, the agency staff—in most cases

the project founder—was then asked to communicate what activities, and resources the agency would have to commit in order to achieve the identified effects articulated at the very beginning of the cycle of services. The United Way outcome measurement standard required of faith grantees was similar to that asked of its secular grantees with the exception that if grantees were interested in measuring spiritual outcomes, they were given that latitude.

This routine of predicting, articulating, documenting and achieving outcomes represented an evaluation routine that is quickly becoming a standard across the human services program community. Although there were concerns expressed at the outset, in the end neither the United Way nor the faith-based grantees felt that the outcome measurement training compromised the goals and objectives of their projects. Each concluded that young people were provided important services that were clearly predicted, achieved, and documented.

Lessons emerging from the three-year review of the program

- Faith-based organizations were accepting of secular evaluation ideas and felt that the added capacity improved their ability to deliver service and compete in the funding world.
- Faith-based agencies were a more acceptable venue for some youth participants because of the context from which they delivered services
- Faith-based organizations did not feel compelled to "inculcate" a faith perspective.

Below are examples of three successful United Way/FBOs collaborations.

The Baker House

The Baker House is located in a majority African-American neighborhood in the Dorchester section of Boston. Its clients over the years have been primarily young black males. These youth are at high risk, as they live in a poor community where income levels are well below the city's average. Other risk factors include high levels of unemployment rates and frequent neighborhood violence.

The Baker House was founded in the mid 1990s with the goals of addressing the needs of at risk youth, especially young men who have been involved in the judicial system or at risk of exhibited dangerous (social) behaviors.

During weekly meetings, youth, staff, and community agents such as the police, local non-profits, court officers and sometimes representatives from the district attorney's office meet to discuss violence-related issues in this North Dorchester neighborhood.

Specifically, staff at the Baker House seek to decrease crime in the area by identifying at-risk youth (those young people more likely to cause trouble in the neighborhood). Staff and community members then provide mentoring for youth as a community crime prevention strategy.

While the Baker House refrains from direct religious or theological inculcation, religious icons adorn the site, providing signals or theological statements. Program participants and community agents say that staff interaction with youth possesses a moral content. While salvific rituals are not encouraged, moral language and theologically inspired information is freely dispensed.

Desired outcomes for the Baker House include:

Outcome 1
Youth believe they'll live past 20 years.

Outcome 2
Youth believe they have self-worth.

Outcome 3
Youth believe that they are more important than high-risk behaviors.

My observed experience is that the Baker House is valued in the community it serves and has attracted a good reputation among the youth it serves as well as community organizations, residents and city, state and federal representatives.

Bruce Wall Ministries

This project is located in the Codman Square section of Boston, not far from the Baker House. The mission of the "New Horizon" project is directed towards job training and placement for youth in this at-risk community. The program, located at the Dorchester Baptist Temple, seeks to make direct appeals to at risk young people across the city.

During the school year, high school students (evenly split between male and female) visit the church-based program to take computer classes. The program also offers résumé writing training and job interview preparation. The program has been successful at securing summer and after-school employment for youth. To a lesser extent, college preparatory skill building is also featured.

In the program, students are offered opportunities to pray. The importance of spiritual development is openly discussed within

the context of program service delivery. Bible scripture reading is allowed and "faith" is lauded as a worthy attribute that youth should possess.

Desired outcomes for the New Horizon program at Bruce Wall Ministries include:

Outcome 1
Youth will successfully complete 7 weeks of work in a professional environment.

Outcome 2
Youth will have acquired a beginning level of work skills compatible with their intern experience.

Outcome 3
Youth will have learned how to achieve positive goals individually and within a group.

City Mission Society

City Mission Society, a faith-based social service ministry, operated the Boston Area Youth Organizing Project (BYOP). This project is facilitated by the ministry but led by youth as an opportunity to develop leadership skills and promote positive social change. It is a non-denominational group with chapters in churches and synagogues and schools across the greater Boston area.

BYOP's core program is centered in the historically African-American South End community. In recent years the neighborhood has significantly gentrified. Youth at the Boston site are African-American and Latino between the ages of 13 and 19 years old.

Youth are offered opportunities to reflect on such spiritual leaders as Martin Luther King Jr., Jesus Christ or the Buddha.

Specific outcome relative to the BYOP program include:

Outcome 1
Youth will be able to develop healthy peer relationships

Outcome 2
Youth will develop healthy relationships with adults.

Outcome 3
Youth will acquire organizing, policy and organizing skills.

BYOP has proven to be a leader among youth-serving agencies across the city of Boston. In less than five years, it has attracted local media attention and support from national funders for the programs it offers.

Conclusion

The United Way of Massachusetts Bay's Faith in Action Initiative is a model of how a funder and its grantees have grappled with the issue of faith and social action. The model provides valuable instruction on how to successfully increase capacity among urban churches serving the needs of a mainly African-American community.

While definitive conclusions and results of the initiative are distant, it is appears clear that there exists a role that faith-based organizations can play in responding to the needs of the poor in partnership with funders and the government.

Some conclusions about the Faith in Action Initiative seem certain. They are: (a) that faith-based organizations can "learn" program evaluation techniques without significant investments of time or funds; (b) that human service projects based in FBOs do not see evaluation practices as diminishing service offering; and (c) that

faith-based programs need not attempt to "convert" program participants in order to provide needed services to youth.

Clearly, training is necessary in order to provide faith-based organizations with the ability to compete with their secular counterparts for funding from foundation or governmental sources. But only time will tell how far the FBO/government partnership can go.

Kevin Peterson is a senior director at the United Way of Massachusetts Bay. He served as senior staff person for the foundation's Faith in Action Initiative.