

Symposium on Faith-Based Organizations and Community Development **October 30, 2000**

Introductory Remarks

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It is my pleasure to welcome you to this symposium, which marks the formal beginning of our institute's initiative for service to faith-based organizations in fulfilling their roles in community development and for related research that ultimately will provide knowledge useful in such work. In that regard, I would like to thank the working group of clergy, extension faculty, human service professionals, and lay religious workers and parishioners from across the Carolinas who have been assisting us in planning the initiative. I also want to recognize several members of our own faculty and staff who collaborated in the development of this symposium and the arrangements for it, particularly Mark Small, Paulette Grate, Kathy Wilson, and Shelli Charles.

Collectively, we have structured this symposium not only, we hope, to inform you and stimulate your thinking about faith-based organizations' roles in community development but also to learn about your own ideas and experiences about such efforts. We expect that this symposium will be interactive and that we will all be participants in the broadest sense. So let me thank you in advance for your contributions.

In giving credit where it is due, I would be remiss if I did not also gratefully acknowledge the financial support of Alliance 2020, the Kellogg Foundation-funded project to foster collaboration in the public interest by faculty and staff at Clemson, South Carolina State, and the South Carolina

technical colleges. Most of the funds and personnel time needed to plan and implement this initiative have come, however, from our institute's base budget.

That contribution concretely illustrates the importance that we place on this initiative. The initiative for technical assistance, continuing education, and research related to faith-based organizations' roles in community development integrates such work in several programs of our young institute. We are pleased to host the recently established South Carolina Center for Grassroots and Nonprofit Leadership, the education and research arm of a collaborative bringing together foundations, faith-based organizations, other nonprofit organizations, state agencies, and universities in support of the voluntary associations, both formal and informal, in the state. Further, our National Center for Rural Justice and Crime Prevention is designed to assist rural and small-town organizations, including those that are faith-based, in community action to prevent crime and ameliorate its effects. In both the United States and emerging democracies, our Center for Youth Participation and Human Rights examines, among other topics, children's participation in faith-based organizations and their rights related to religious exercise. Our regional Center for Family Support and Parent Leadership is designed to study the ways that regional values, including those related to spirituality, and social structure, including the place of faith-based organizations, affect the community support available

to families of young children, and then to apply such knowledge to the development of new or enhanced means of support. Finally and most broadly, the Center for Neighborhood Development provides a context for studies of factors affecting the support that community institutions, including faith-based organizations, can and do give to family and neighborhood life.

Some Personal Reflections

I mention these diverse activities as an introduction to the question about which I am focusing most of my remarks—a question that some of you may already have pondered: “Why should a public university be undertaking an initiative to assist religious institutions in their work related to community development?” Without, I hope, seeming too presumptuous, I would like to begin my consideration of this question by referring to my own experience.

I grew up in a long line of United Methodist leaders, both ordained and lay. My paternal grandfather and his family of origin were the first residents of the parsonage of the Methodist church in the small town in North Carolina where I grew up. (“Just where is Granite Quarry?” will be the trivia question of this symposium.) My great-grandfather, who had the now quaint given name of Romeo, was the pastor. Continuing the tradition, both my brother and his wife are ministers and religious educators, my sister-in-law also being an attorney who practices church law, both secular and canon, and who educates church staff about ways to ensure the safety of their child parishioners. My mother works for a church conference center, and another brother is the principal vocal soloist in the church of which he is a member. Indeed, most of my relatives—primary and extended—are active in United Methodist leadership, as were most in the generations who preceded us.

Although my own religious beliefs have diverged somewhat from that tradition, I have no doubt that my personal and professional commitment to human rights was a product of the ethos of respect within my family, which in turn both emerged from and strengthened religious faith. I might add that I am aware of similar backgrounds of many colleagues around the country whose scholarship, like my own, blends studies of psychology

and law. I suspect that religious values often lie at the root of sensitivity to the most fundamental dimensions of human experience (“psychological-mindedness”)—to family and other intimate relationships—and commitment to their protection through law and policy.

Perhaps even more to the point of this symposium, my North Carolina childhood gave me a practical education in the centrality of religion in American social life—a meaning that is amplified in Southern small towns and rural communities. Life in Granite Quarry, like many American small towns, revolved to a large extent around its several churches. Indeed, the importance of the few constant institutions in Southern small towns is signaled in my own experience by the childhood events and feelings that stand out in my memory. Most of my vivid memories are about events and feelings experienced in church or school, and most of those experiences in turn were focused on intergenerational, family-related *social* events, whether everyday activities or special community celebrations or expressions of shared sorrow.

The most eloquent description that I have seen of that centrality was published by a perhaps unlikely commentator in a certainly unlikely forum: a column by Jane Pauley in an airline magazine (Kellogg, 1995). Pauley was the principal speaker at the anniversary celebration of the country church in Indiana that her grandparents had helped to establish 75 years earlier. The topic that Pauley chose was “remembrance”:

the importance of pausing in remembrance of things we have no personal memory of; the connections to all those families in the church I never really knew and yet, being part of my grandparents’ circle, are part of my own. And the glowing faces of my own children as I spoke about “family” is what I most remember. I saw that they got it.

Pauley told about her early memories of her parents’ and grandparents’ efforts to keep her contented at church services, of the smell of the grapes that her grandparents raised for the church Communion, of the plucking of chickens for Sunday dinner. Describing the church speech in the brief magazine article, she associated to another recent talk that was not of the sort that celebrities usually give but that was personally important: a speech to a service organization in her New York City neighborhood.

A month before Pauley's father died, he attended the meeting, where he heard her give "virtually a testimonial to him"—a speech about being a good neighbor.

Summarizing these experiences, Pauley described the theme of her vivid memories as "connections to the past and caring for each other—family, friends, or neighbors"—as "Midwestern values" that she hoped to transmit to her "little native-New Yorker kids." If Pauley had grown up in the South, a regional attribution might have been more valid, because religiosity has long been strongest in this region.

That quibble misses the point, however, because the sentiments that Pauley recalled were reflections not so much of "Midwestern [or Southern] values" as of human concern—"people values." It is telling in that regard that Pauley's compelling description of the meaning of *community*—connections among people, even across the generations—was grounded in memories of the rural church that served to join her family to their community and indeed to each other.

Faith-Based Organizations as Reservoirs of Capital

I am sure that most of you share similar memories. What then do such memories say about the topic for our consideration today and tomorrow: the role of faith-based organizations in community development? One answer, which may sound crass to those accustomed to theological language, is that community development depends on efficient use of capital, and faith-based organizations typically are reservoirs of capital, even though that capital often is not systematically invested.

At the level perhaps most familiar, faith-based organizations sometimes are stewards of great stores of economic wealth; the real estate that churches own and the investment portfolios that they control are sometimes enormous. In such an instance, faith-based organizations, especially those with an episcopal structure that concentrates ultimate control of their wealth, have a great responsibility to invest their economic resources in a manner that uplifts the community, particularly its neediest members.

I suspect, though, that such a dilemma is one that is rarely faced by the congregations that many of you lead. The more common scenario among small churches and

temples and the service organizations that they sponsor is, at best, one of financial fragility. Small congregations are more likely to wonder how to pay the utility bill resulting from their weekend services than to ponder the most efficient expansion of their philanthropic activities in the community.

That observation does not change the strength of my assumption that faith-based organizations, even in the most disadvantaged communities, commonly possess substantial capital that could be used to strengthen those communities. Economists today recognize that development requires not only financial capital but also two other forms: human capital and social capital. *Human capital* refers to the skills and labor needed to expand the financial assets in a community. As community centers, faith-based organizations are places where people gather and, by that fact, offer a concentration of human capital among the congregation members. When a Habitat for Humanity home is built, for example, the congregation or other group that undertakes the task pools the skills and "sweat equity" of its members.

Perhaps even more in keeping with faith-based organizations' mission, however, is the fact that they are reservoirs of *social capital*—the associations among people that facilitate transactions among them. Contracts, for example, are based on a history of interaction sufficient for trust.

Although the purpose of faith-based organizations obviously is not primarily to facilitate business growth, a by-product of vibrant religious life in a community is the growth of social capital. It is interesting how many times the word *connections* is found in the brief personal memoir that Jane Pauley wrote about her childhood in a small Indiana church and its reflection in her current family and community life. Such connections are the foundation of the quality of life in a community. They transform everyday life so that people's causes for celebration or sorrow are noticed and that they can count on help without having to ask—in effect, so that the Golden Rule is a norm of the community.

Early in the 19th century, Toqueville (1835/2000) found Americans' participation in community life to be without a parallel elsewhere:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all minds constantly unite together. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other types: religious, moral, solemn, frivolous, very general and very particular, immense and very small. The Americans form associations in order to hold holiday celebrations, found seminaries, build hostels, erect churches, disseminate books, and send missionaries to the ends of the earth; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, and schools. Finally, if it is a question of bringing a truth to light or developing a sentiment with the aid of a great example, they form associations.... (p. 211)

Putting together Toqueville's observations with those of Pauley more than 150 years later, one can easily see why the vibrancy of voluntary organizations for community service is a necessary ingredient for community development. Such a rich social life promises potential financial investors that they will be able to count on an informed and concerned citizenry ensuring that the rule of law is respected, that the requisites for human capital development (particularly education) will be facilitated and protected, and that the employees will be motivated to keep their community "a nice place to live" and to work accordingly—in essence, that the steps that should be taken to ensure that the community remains alive and functional will be taken.

Further, the connections within congregations themselves—their social capital—can serve as the foundation for economic action to support members with acute economic needs. Using the strength of scale and the easy transfer of skills among members, some religious institutions (e.g., larger Black churches) have developed, for example, impressive programs to support members' training in micro-business development and to assist them in marketing their products. Others have developed partnerships with sister organizations in their own or other neighborhoods to facilitate such action. (The materials in your notebooks provide some flavor of the possibilities.)

Implications

In short, to ignore the potential of faith-based organizations is to overlook many of the resources that can

be gathered in support of community development, especially in communities that now are short on financial wealth. That omission may be intended to preserve the autonomy of religious institutions through clear separation between church and state, a matter about which I will say more in a moment. Without belaboring the point, however, I suspect that it is more often the result of a studied secularism in the academy; it is striking how little is known by social scientists around the world about the experience of growing up in a community of faith. However, it would be just as disrespectful of the constituencies that we ultimately serve to ignore the centrality of faith-based organizations in their lives as it would be to try to use the resources of the state to impose our own religious beliefs upon them.

Recognizing that centrality, I pledge that, in keeping with land-grant universities' historic mission of outreach and service to the public, our institute will include faith-based organizations in our efforts to generate and apply knowledge to promote community development and, in particular, to strengthen the connections among families within your communities—in effect, to build social capital. As in the sessions today and tomorrow, we will act as *stimulators of conversation* about the ideas underlying strong community life and the relevance of those ideas to faith-based organizations. We will be *providers of information* about exemplary programs ("best practices") and the opportunities for assistance in replicating them. Further, we will strive to become *generators of knowledge* about the factors facilitating (or impeding) faith-based organizations' action to strengthen their communities and to consider the implications of such knowledge for program and system development.

Some Caveats

In making that pledge, however, I am mindful of several concerns that must be addressed. First, as the Toqueville quote that I read earlier indicates, strong faith-based organizations share many of the characteristics of effective voluntary associations in general. At some level, they do what needs to be done to make their communities better places to live, and they enable their members to rely on each other to meet their families' needs as they arise.

At the same time, faith-based organizations are not simply civic organizations; their foundation in religious faith makes them something more, and that essence must be protected. Plans to enlist faith-based organizations in community development must take into account their special mission.

To be clear, I do not believe that such an accommodation is likely to be difficult. Community development is likely to be facilitated by diligent application of several concepts that are shared by most people of faith, whatever that faith may be. Faith-based organizations almost always are established as *communities of service* motivated by the desire to protect the dignity of human beings created in God's image. The great religions are united by such a concept, particularly in regard to collective and personal action to serve those most in need. Such a theme can be found, for example, in the Christian emphasis on love for humanity (as expressed eloquently in the Sermon on the Mount), the Jewish focus on resistance to oppression, or the Islamic abhorrence of human exploitation and the concern in that tradition for the well-being of one's immediate community.

Such ideas underlie faith-based organizations' role in moral leadership of community development—in effect, providing the motivation for such action. *Prophetic justice* ultimately is built on prophetic hope, the “hope against hope” that defines religious faith (Tinder, 1996). Such hope may assume particular significance in communities that are caught in a long-existing downward spiral of dwindling assets. Reversal of such negative social momentum necessitates infusion of capital, including social capital, which in turn requires conviction that people can make a difference.

Second, I do not underestimate the need to beware of government entanglement with religious institutions. If I may be permitted a return to personal reflections, although I was reared in, and remain respectful of, a traditional Protestant faith, I have long been a Unitarian. This is not the proper forum to elucidate the constancy of principles that I believe to be present in my personal theology. Similarly, I do not mention my own religious affiliation to present a perspective; the individual faculty and staff members in our institute have a range of religious beliefs

and affiliations that comes close to matching the diversity in our society. Rather, the point is that I am a member of a religious minority. At the same time that I appreciate the potential significance of faith-based organizations in creating or sustaining community development, I am acutely aware of the risk that close partnerships between government and religion may undermine or stigmatize the faith of religious minorities.

To an even greater extent, though, I fear the trivialization of spiritual life that may occur when faith-based organizations become agents of government. The mandate to be non-sectarian in delivery of services has the potential to erase or at least modify the religious convictions that motivated such services to begin with. Ironically, by too much reliance on faith-based organizations, we risk destroying the very elements of faith-based organizations that we desire most intensely to emulate and replicate.

As I have already argued, the answer to this concern is clearly not for public institutions like our university to ignore the significance of faith-based organizations in the communities that we serve. Instead, it is to draw lines that we do not cross in our work with faith-based organizations. Such lines, which have become commonly drawn in governments' implementation of charitable-choice provisions and which are constitutionally required, prohibit us from attempting to persuade your organizations to join such programs, influence your organizations' theology, or dictate the structure and procedures for your organizations' management. We will, however, generate and provide information about ways that faith-based organizations have joined in community development efforts and their effectiveness in doing so and about the structures that may facilitate such efforts. In so doing, we will describe the diversity of faith-based social programs and the theology and resources on which they are based.

My third and final caveat follows from the last point. Without entering into the current political squabbles about the characteristics of “uniters” and “dividers,” I wish to raise an issue that has often been expressed in discussions of faith-based organizations' potential in community development. On the one side, faith-based organizations have been important not only in advocating for justice for oppressed minorities but also in supporting *reconciliation*

of both individuals and groups. Such a tradition is supportive of bringing people on the outside into the economic and social mainstream of a community—in effect, to expand the human and social capital available for community development. At the same time, religious affiliation and ethnicity are highly correlated. Religious life remains de facto segregated, not only in local congregations but also to a large extent in the institutional religious structures present in county, state, and national denominational and inter-church alliances. As a result, some worry that a central place for faith-based organizations in community development will ultimately serve to strengthen de facto segregation or simply to result in resources for one group but another.

These are serious concerns that should be kept in mind as we enter into discussions of the roles of faith-based organizations in our communities. My parting comment in that regard is to join in Jane Pauley's "remembrances." The kinds of connections that she remembered, the kinds of connections that I remembered in my own small-town childhood, and, I suspect, the kind of connections that form your own identity are not race-, ethnicity-, or creed-specific. However, they are powerful assets in our efforts to strengthen our communities and families.

Amid the widespread decline in social capital in our society, such resources must be cherished and built upon. At the same time, I am cognizant of the difficulty of the task. Even the model programs surveyed in your notebooks have focused for the most part on specific objec-

tives (e.g., making food available on an emergency basis) that are well within the tradition of American religious organizations. Although such services provide critically important resources for people in great need, they typically fall short in truly transforming the communities in which they are present. Building stronger, more easily sustainable communities is a substantially more ambitious, indeed prophetic goal—a difficult goal worth striving to meet.

Thank you for coming to this symposium and joining in that quest. We look forward to learning from you as our discussions evolve over the next couple of days and to working with you as we plan and implement our initiative of assistance to faith-based organizations in the Carolinas.

References

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