

Religious Congregations and Welfare Reform: Assessing the Potential

Mark Chaves

Several years have passed since the groundbreaking passage of The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. A once obscure piece of that legislation—section 104, known as “charitable choice”—altered the conditions under which religious organizations may deliver publicly supported social services to the poor. The charitable choice provisions, and the advocacy efforts surrounding them, have renewed attention to normative and empirical questions concerning church/state relations in general, and religion’s role in our social welfare system in particular.

The charitable choice language in the welfare reform legislation requires states to include religious organizations as eligible contractees if they contract with nonprofit organizations for social service delivery using funding streams established by this legislation. States may not require that a religious organization alter its form of internal governance or remove religious art, icons, scripture, or other symbols as a condition for contracting to deliver services, and the law asserts that contracting religious organizations shall retain control over the definition, development, practice, and expression of their religious beliefs. This legislation is widely interpreted as establishing that organizations whose main activity is religion (such as congregations) may receive public money to support social service activity. Further legislative change in this direction is likely as pro-charitable choice advocates seek to attach similar provisions to other funding streams.

It is not clear exactly what charitable choice permits that was not previously permitted, at least de facto. The legality of government funding for religiously-affiliated organizations whose main activity is social service delivery, such as Catholic Charities USA, the Salvation Army, and Lutheran Social Services in America—or other, smaller, religiously-affiliated social service agencies—has been established for a long time and is not affected by charitable choice. Research also has shown that, before charitable choice became law, religious social service providers wishing to maintain a religious atmosphere or religious content in their programming—and not all, perhaps not even most, religious social service providers wish to do this—commonly did so openly and with no consequent problems with or interference from their government fun-

ders. Stephen Monsma (1996), for example, surveyed international aid agencies and child service agencies in 1993-94. For those organizations that received both government funding and reported that they engaged in religious practices, the majority of religious practices that they engage in—62 percent for the international aid agencies and 77 percent for the child service agencies—were done openly. Only a minority of religiously affiliated, government-funded, child service agencies—11 percent—reported having to curtail religious activities, and only a minority—22 percent—publicly funded, religious, international aid agencies reported experiencing any sort of pressure or problem about their religious activities. Most if not all of the activities about which problems were reported, such as requiring attendance at religious services, are the kind of sectarian worship, instruction, or proselytizing activities that are prohibited even under charitable choice. Such results may legitimately make us wonder just what problem charitable choice legislation was intended to solve.

More significant than legal change, however, may be the administrative actions inspired by the charitable choice movement. Several states have established programs that proactively encourage religious organizations to apply for government funding or somehow develop partnerships with government anti-poverty programs. At the national level, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has created a Center for Community and Interfaith Partnerships for the same purpose. More dramatically, the charitable choice movement also has inspired earmarking of public money for religious organizations. HUD has announced that the amount of money it will direct in 2001 to “faith-based” housing and community groups would be \$200 million more than the amount such groups received in 2000. California recently launched a “Faith-Based Initiative” that dedicated up to \$5 million for grants to religious organizations for employment assistance programs. It is worth noting that although charitable choice, in its legal sense, mandates only *nondiscrimination* with respect to religion in funding competitions, the charitable choice movement has inspired administrative actions that amount to *preferences* for religious organizations in public funding streams.

There is much to say about these efforts. They raise legal, practical, moral, theological, and sociological questions, all of which deserve close attention. This chapter will concentrate on questions concerning congregations that are raised by charitable choice. Religious congregations—churches, synagogues, mosques—constitute only a subset of the “faith-based organizations” envisioned by charitable choice advocates, and probably not the most important subset. Although advocates of “faith-based” social service often point to congregation-based programs as exemplars, congregations are far less important actors in the social service arena than are religious social service agencies like the Salvation Army and Catholic Charities (McCarthy and Castelli 1998). Moreover, early signs indicate that, when states make special efforts to encourage religious organizations to seek public funding for anti-poverty work, the

majority of grants and contracts go to religious organizations dedicated to social service activity, not to congregations (Sherman, 2000; Anderson, Orr, and Silverman, 2000).

Why, then, examine congregations in this context? First, congregations are the core religious organizations in American society, and they are the prototypical “pervasively sectarian” organizations whose inclusion in large numbers in our publicly supported social welfare system would constitute a qualitative change in church/state relations regarding social services. Second, congregations are an appropriate subset of religious organizations for the purpose of examining some of the key assumptions behind the charitable choice movement. One key assumption is that there is a distinctively religious approach to social services, one that might be undermined by collaborations with government and secular nonprofits. If there is a distinctively holistic or transformational approach to social service delivery that emerges from a religious base, it ought to be visible in the activities undertaken by the organizations—congregations—where religion is most central.

A second key assumption behind the charitable choice movement, related to the first, is that the religiously distinctive approach constitutes an important alternative to social services delivered by nonreligious, most notably government, agencies, and this alternative approach’s distinctiveness is potentially undermined by collaboration with such agencies. If that approach is likely to be undermined by collaborations with secular organizations, we ought to see systematically different congregational activity when secular, especially government, collaborators are involved. Congregations are appropriate organizations—perhaps the most appropriate organizations—in which to examine these assumptions by looking for evidence that religiously-based social services are distinctively holistic, personable, and so on, or that a holistic approach to social service is likely to be undermined by collaboration with nonreligious, especially government, agencies.

I will address several specific questions in this chapter. Among them: To what extent are congregations currently involved in social service delivery? What kinds of things do they do? Do congregations engage in social services in particular kinds of ways? With whom do they collaborate, and with what consequences for their activities? To what extent are religious congregations inclined to take advantage of new funding opportunities made explicit by charitable choice? Whatever the absolute level of interest among congregations in moving in this direction, which subsets of congregations are likely to take advantage of these opportunities and be part of this movement to channel more public funds through religious organizations? Data from the National Congregations Study (NCS), a 1998 survey of a nationally representative sample of 1236 religious congregations, will be used to address these questions.¹

1 For more information about National Congregations Study methodology, see Chaves et al. (1999).

The answers are sometimes surprising.

The rest of this chapter is divided into two main sections. The first uses NCS data to address the questions listed above. A second, shorter, section moves beyond these data to call attention to several issues that ought to receive attention in discussions about religion and social services.

FOCUS ON CONGREGATIONS²

What Social Services Do Congregations Do?

Charitable choice advocates sometimes argue that congregations already are an important component of our social welfare system, giving the impression that the vast majority of them actively and intensively engage in social services. The truth is somewhat different. Although a majority of congregations—57 percent—engage in some more or less formal social service, community development, or neighborhood organizing projects, the intensity of that involvement varies greatly. Regarding food programs, for example, congregations may donate money to a community food bank, supply volunteers for a Meals on Wheels project, organize a food drive every Thanksgiving, or operate independent food pantries or soup kitchens. When it comes to housing, congregations may provide volunteers to do occasional home repair for the needy, assist first-time home buyers with congregational funds, participate in neighborhood redevelopment efforts, or build affordable housing for senior citizens. When serving the homeless, congregations might donate money to a neighborhood shelter, provide volunteers who prepare dinner at a shelter on a rotating basis with other congregations, or actually provide shelter for homeless women and children in the congregation's building.

One measure of the depth to which congregations are involved in these activities is the percent having a staff person devoting at least quarter-time to social service projects. Only 6 percent of all congregations, and only 12 percent of those reporting some degree of social service involvement, have such a staff person. Other measures are also informative. The median dollar amount spent by congregations directly in support of social service programs is about \$1,200, about three percent the median congregation's total budget. In the median congregation with social service projects of some sort, only 10 congregants are involved in this work as volunteers. The basic picture is clear: although most congregations do some sort of social service activity, only a small minority actively and intensively engage in such activity.

Congregations also favor some types of projects over others. Housing, clothing, and, especially, food projects are more common than programs dealing with health, education, domestic violence, tutoring/mentoring, substance abuse, or work issues. Fewer than 10 percent of congregations have programs

² This section summarizes results reported in more detail in Chaves (1999) and Chaves and Tsitsos (2000).

in any of these latter areas. By comparison, 11 percent have clothing projects, 18 percent have housing/shelter projects, and 33 percent have food-related projects. Eight percent of congregations report providing services to homeless people.

The big picture here is that congregations are much more likely to engage in activities that address the immediate needs of individuals for food, clothing, and shelter than to engage in projects or programs that require sustained involvement to meet longer-term goals. Congregations certainly are not absent from this latter type of activity, but they engage in it much less frequently. This pattern is confirmed when we directly examine the programs reported by congregations with an eye to distinguishing longer-term, face-to-face activities, on the one hand, from shorter-term, more fleeting activities, on the other hand. Programs that appear to involve only short-term or fleeting kinds of contact with the needy are far more common among congregations than programs that involve more intensive or long-term, face-to-face interaction. Only 10 percent of congregations (comprising 20 percent of attenders) are involved in the more personal kinds of programs. On the other, 36 percent of congregations (including over 50 percent of attenders) participate in or support the more fleeting kinds of activities.

These results contradict one of the above mentioned assumptions that often is articulated in discourse about charitable choice: that religious organizations engage in social services in a distinctively holistic or personal way. NCS results show that there is a distinctive type of congregational involvement in social services, but it is not of the sort usually envisioned. Congregational social services are much more commonly characterized by attention to short-term emergency needs, especially for food, clothing, and shelter, than by attention to more personal and intensive face-to-face interaction or by holistic attention to cross-cutting problems.

How Do Congregations Do Social Services?

Beyond the tendency to focus on short-term, emergency needs, congregations also tend to structure their social service involvement in a distinctive way. In the most common housing-related activities, for example, congregations take on home repair or renovation projects for the needy, providing both materials and volunteers to do the work—often in collaboration with Habitat for Humanity. Another common type of activity is at the intersection of food programs and serving the homeless: cooking meals for the homeless on a regular basis. Fairly typical of this subcategory is the congregation that has a “red beans and rice ministry to feed the homeless once a week,” or the one that prepares a “homeless dinner once a week,” or the congregation that “serves breakfast on Saturday and lunch on Sunday to the homeless and hungry.”

A general pattern is discernible: When congregations do more than donate money or canned goods or old clothes, they are most apt to organize small groups of volunteers to conduct relatively well-defined tasks on a periodic

basis—15 people spend several weekends renovating a house, 5 people cook dinner at a homeless shelter one night a week, 10 young people spend two summer weeks painting a school in a poor community, and so on. Half of all congregations say that they support social service activities by providing volunteers. Of congregations engaged in some level of social service activity, 90 percent support at least one activity with volunteers from the congregation. At the same time, the total number of volunteers provided by the typical congregation is rather small. As mentioned above, in the median congregation engaged in some level of social service activity, only 10 of its people have volunteered in these activities over the past year. In 80 percent of the congregations engaged in these activities, fewer than 30 volunteers participated in the past year. In this light, it probably is not an accident that congregational involvement is highest where organizations have emerged to exploit congregations' capacity to mobilize relatively small numbers of volunteers to carry out well-defined and bounded tasks.

The preceding paragraphs provide a portrait of congregations' social service activities that is more modest—and realistic—than much of the public discourse on this topic. Armed with a realistic appraisal of congregations' social service activities, however, we need not abandon the notion that congregations are sites of important anti-poverty work in our society. A small percentage of active congregations does not imply trivial absolute levels of contribution. There are approximately 300,000 congregations in the United States. If one-half of one percent of those congregations are deeply engaged in social service activity, that represents roughly 1500 congregations. Some of those congregations currently run large-scale and multi-faceted social service programs that are central to the well-being of their communities. These are the congregations that have received the most media attention in recent years. Recognizing that these congregations are very uncommon—and likely to remain very uncommon in the future—does not mean that the contributions of these congregations should be minimized. This recognition should, however, prompt a shift from sweeping claims about idealized congregations to more modest assessments about the potential role that a small percentage of active congregations might play under a new welfare regime.

Which congregations do more social services?

Although the aggregate rate of congregations' social service activity is rather low, some congregations obviously do quite a lot of this activity, including operating their own programs. Which congregations are most active? Let me highlight three patterns. The first is unsurprising, but its importance is such that it should be clearly stated: larger congregations do more than smaller congregations. Although only about 1 percent of congregations have more than 900 regularly participating adults, these largest 1 percent account for about one-quarter of the money directly spent by congregations on social service activity. Only about 10 percent of congregations have 250 or more regular par-

ticipants, but this 10 percent accounts for more than half the money that all congregations spend on social service activity. Clearly, a minority of large congregations do the bulk of the social services carried out by all congregations.

A second pattern is less obvious. On the one hand, congregations located in poor neighborhoods tend to do more social service activity than congregations located in non-poor neighborhoods. On the other hand, congregations with more middle class people in them do more social service activity than congregations with more poor people in them, *and this is true even of congregations in poor neighborhoods*. Taken together, these two results imply that the congregations located in poor neighborhoods but composed of non-poor people do the most social service and community activity. Within poor communities, less poor or more middle-class congregations do the most social service activity. This pattern suggests that a congregation's own resources are crucially important in generating social service activity. Congregations located in poor neighborhoods, but without the internal resources that come with middle-class constituents, do not do as much social service activity as congregations with more of those resources.

Third, religious tradition matters in ways we have come to expect. Congregations associated with mainline Protestant denominations do more social services than conservative Protestant congregations. Catholic congregations are neither more nor less active than conservative Protestant congregations. Beyond denominational affiliation, self-described theologically liberal congregations also do more social services than self-described conservative congregations. This pattern is consistent with previous research on both congregations and individuals showing that mainline individuals and congregations are, in a variety of ways, more connected to their surrounding communities than are individuals and congregations associated with more evangelical or conservative traditions (Wuthnow 1999; Chaves et al. 2001; Ammerman 2001).

With whom, and with what consequences, do congregations collaborate in social service delivery?

Congregational social service activity is mainly done in collaboration with other organizations. Eighty-four percent of congregations that do social services have at least one collaborator on at least one program. Seventy-two percent of all programs are done in collaboration with others. Although other congregations are the single most common type of collaborator, congregations that do social services are as likely to collaborate with some sort of secular organization (59 percent of congregations, 38 percent of programs) as with some sort of religious organization (58 percent of congregations, 40 percent of programs). Although only 3 percent of congregations currently receive government financial support for their social service activity, about a fifth of those with programs collaborate in some fashion with a government agency. Clearly, when congregations do social services they mainly do them in collaboration with others, including secular and government agencies in non-trivial numbers.

Congregations are not equally likely to collaborate. Large, mainline Protestant, theologically liberal congregations with more college graduates are significantly more likely than others to collaborate on social services. Interestingly, although there are no race differences in the likelihood of collaborating in general, predominantly African-American congregations are significantly more likely than white congregations to collaborate with *secular* organizations on social services.

When congregations collaborate with secular, especially government agencies, are they less likely to engage in the longer-term, more holistic or transformational kinds of social services some claim to be their special purview? The clear answer is *no*. Looking first at individual programs, congregational social service programs involving secular collaborators are slightly *more* likely (9.8 percent versus 6.8 percent) than programs involving non-secular, or no collaborators to be more personal and long-term. And they are significantly *less* likely (24.6 percent versus 35 percent) to be more fleeting and superficial. Programs involving government collaborators are significantly *less* likely to be fleeting and superficial (21.3 percent versus 31.6 percent). The pattern is similar when we focus on congregations as wholes rather than on specific programs: With many other variables controlled, congregations with secular collaborators are significantly *more* likely to be engaged in longer-term, more personal, more face-to-face kinds of social service activities than are congregations without such collaborations. Congregations with government collaborators are no less likely than congregations without government collaborators to participate in or support those kinds of programs. None of these differences is large, and we are mindful of the limits of measurement here. We would not want to argue on the basis of these results alone that secular collaborations actually encourage more holistic kinds of social services. Still, these results clearly do not support the notion that such collaborations are likely to *discourage* holistic social services.

Thus, contrary to another assumption described above—that a distinctively holistic or personal approach to social services is potentially threatened by collaborations with secular, especially government, agencies—there is no evidence here that collaborating with secular organizations in general, or with government agencies in particular, makes congregations less likely to engage in the more personalistic and longer-term social service activities some think are more likely to occur within a religious sphere that guards its autonomy. Indeed, such collaborations may even *encourage* the more holistic types of activities some claim to be the distinctive province of religious organizations.

Who Will Take Advantage of Charitable Coice?

Congregations' current involvement in social services is only part of the story. We also might ask about congregations' interest in expanding their social service activities by taking advantage of funding opportunities prompted by the charitable choice movement. Whatever social services they currently provide,

and whatever the current levels of collaboration with secular and government agencies, are religious congregations inclined to take advantage of new funding opportunities made explicit by charitable choice?

The National Congregations Study collected data from congregations via 60-minute interviews with a key informant (a minister, priest, rabbi, or other leader) from each congregation. Informants were asked whether or not they thought their congregation would apply for government money to support the congregations' human services programs. Fifteen percent of congregations sufficiently oppose the idea of receiving government money for the informant to say they have a congregational policy against receiving such support. However, 36 percent of congregations would be interested in applying for government money to support human services programs.

This should not be taken to mean that more than one-third of American congregations are likely to apply for government grants and contracts in the coming years. A clergyperson's expressed interest in moving in this direction is not at all the same thing as willingness among people in the congregation, and we know from other research that clergy tend to be more supportive than parishioners of moving in this direction. This number, then, probably should be interpreted as a maximum—an estimate of the percentage of American congregations for which there is some chance that they actually would apply for government funds if given the opportunity. Recall, however, that only about 3 percent of congregations currently receive government money for social service projects. From this baseline even a small increase—say, 5 percentage points—in the proportion of congregations receiving public funds could represent a major change in church-state relations in the United States and a major increase in religious congregations' participation in our social welfare system. The overall level of expressed willingness to seek government support indicates that there is at least some potential for increased numbers of government-congregation partnerships in social service delivery. There is a market for charitable choice implementation in American religion.

Whatever the absolute level of interest among congregations, which subsets of congregations are likely to take advantage of charitable choice opportunities and participate in this movement to channel more public funds through religious organizations? As with current levels of social service activity, large congregations are considerably more likely to express interest in seeking government funds. The most interesting patterns, however, demonstrate the enduring power both of race and of a liberal/conservative institutional and ideological divide to structure American religion's engagement with state and society. These patterns are particularly noteworthy because they run counter to what has been the national politics surrounding charitable choice.

Regarding race, a congregation's ethnic composition is by far the most powerful predictor of willingness to apply for government funds. Informants from 64 percent of predominantly African-American congregations expressed

a willingness to apply for government funds compared to only 28 percent from predominantly white congregations. Controlling other congregational features, predominantly black congregations are *five times* more likely than other congregations to seek public support for social service activities.

Placing this result in the context of two other facts about African-American religion further enhances its importance. First, there already is a lower wall—both culturally and institutionally—between church and state in African-American religion than in other religious communities in the United States. Second, clergy in predominantly black churches enjoy greater power than their counterparts in predominantly white churches to initiate and implement congregational programs of their choosing. Both of these features of African-American religion increase the likelihood that clergy-reported interest in seeking government funding will translate into concrete organizational action. In this light, I would predict that, if charitable choice initiatives successfully redirect public monies to religious congregations, African-American congregations will be substantially over represented among those who take advantage of these opportunities.

Regarding the liberal/conservative ideological and institutional divide among whites, Catholic and liberal/moderate Protestant congregations are significantly more likely to apply for government funds in support of social service activities than are conservative/evangelical congregations. Forty-one percent of congregations in liberal/moderate Protestant denominations said they would be willing to apply for government funds compared to 40 percent of Catholic congregations and only 28 percent of congregations in conservative/evangelical denominations. Furthermore, when informants were asked to classify their congregations as liberal-leaning, conservative-leaning, or middle-of-the-road, congregations identified as theologically and politically conservative are significantly less likely to express willingness to apply for government funds, and this is true even after controlling denominational affiliation and other characteristics. Although the institutional boundaries represented by denominations remain salient on this issue, liberal/conservative ideological identities cross-cut denominational lines in important ways, and this cultural divide matters when it comes to expressed willingness to pursue charitable choice opportunities.

These religious tradition differences present a stark contrast to the political battle lines on charitable choice. At the national elite level of Congresspeople and major advocacy organizations, it was, in general political, and religious *conservatives* who were the strongest *advocates* of charitable choice legislation, and political and religious *liberals* who were most strongly *against* it. Senator John Ashcroft, Republican of Missouri sponsored the charitable choice section of the welfare reform legislation, and prominent conservative religious organizations such as the Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council actively promoted initiatives inspired by this legislation.

Nationally prominent liberal religious organizations, in contrast, strongly opposed charitable choice legislation and initiatives. Americans United for the Separation of Church and State assembled a coalition of 46 organizations opposed to Charitable Choice, including Catholics for a Free Choice; Central Conference of American Rabbis; Friends Committee on National Legislation; General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church; Presbyterian Church (USA), Washington Office; Unitarian Universalist Association, Washington Office; United Church of Christ, Office for Church in Society; and Union of American Hebrew Congregations. These organizations opposed charitable choice mainly in the name of avoiding deeper engagement between churches and the state.

This debate has attenuated somewhat since the 1996 passage of the welfare reform legislation. Now that charitable choice is a legislative fait accompli—at least with respect to welfare reform—religious groups of all stripes are trying to figure out what it means and how best to move forward in the new context. Still, it is worth noting that the religious differences among congregations when it comes to an expressed willingness to pursue government funding of social services (liberals more in favor than conservatives) are the mirror image of the religious differences among national elites on this issue (conservatives in favor, liberals opposed).

The congregation-level differences, however, are consistent with a longstanding sociological divide within American religion. Whether labeled pre-millennialist/postmillennialist, fundamentalist/modernist, or conservative/liberal, American religion has long been characterized by a difference between, on the one hand, religion that encourages reformist engagement with state and society and, on the other hand, religion that avoids such engagement. If charitable choice initiatives are successful in reaching American congregations, the congregations most likely to take advantage may not be the ones our political and religious leaders expect to take advantage. It is possible, of course, that the charitable choice movement will alter the institutional landscape in ways that will make the future very different from the present. It seems more likely, however, that the longstanding cultural and institutional divides in American religion will remain more potent predictors of congregational inclinations and activity than would be expected on the basis of the national politics of charitable choice.

Beyond Congregations

Charitable choice raises issues beyond congregations, and it raises questions that we do not yet have sufficient empirical evidence to answer. While the first section of this chapter focused on empirical questions that were answerable with available evidence, here I raise some questions that go beyond the available evidence about congregations in particular or religious organizations in general. These are offered as issues that ought to receive attention as we move forward in a climate in which religiously-based social services are receiving quite a lot of attention.

Are religious social services better than secular social services?

The strong version of the charitable choice agenda—the agenda of preferring religious to secular social service providers rather than simply refraining from discriminating against religious providers—is in large measure based on claims about religious organizations’ greater effectiveness in delivering social services. Public discourse on religious nonprofit organizations is filled with claims like these: Religious organizations are especially effective in working with the hardest-to-serve populations. They are more flexible and responsive than government agencies and, presumably, than secular nonprofits. They provide more holistic kinds of service, attending to individuals’ multiple needs. They are generally more successful than government agencies and, presumably, secular nonprofit service providers. And all of these differences are produced by the religious content in “faith-based” social services. Consequential public policy decisions have been and continue to be made in part on the basis of claims like these.

The ubiquity of these claims notwithstanding, at this writing, *such claims about religious organizations’ distinct effectiveness are almost completely without empirical foundation*. Schools are the only organizational population on which there is a well-developed research literature addressing the differences, including differences in effectiveness, between religious and secular organizations (Coleman et al. 1982; Bryk et al. 1992). Although we have case studies of other sorts of religious nonprofits conducted with an eye to their functioning and effectiveness relative to similar secular organizations, beyond schools there are very few examples of systematic comparisons between religious and secular nonprofit organizations. Indeed, at this writing, I know of only one extant study which systematically compares religious with secular organizations among a group of organizations centrally involved in service delivery to the American poor or to individuals receiving public assistance and therefore directly implicated in welfare reform.

Reingold et al. (2000) compared religious and secular social service agencies in seven Indiana counties, with mixed results regarding the advantages religious organizations may have over secular organizations. On the one hand, they found that religious organizations are more likely to have tightened client eligibility criteria in response to welfare reform; are less confident about their ability to improve clients job skills; and have fewer ties to public funding agencies, for-profit firms that may provide employment opportunities for clients, and other service providers. On the other hand, a survey of clients showed that the most disadvantaged welfare recipients are more likely to seek assistance from religious than from secular organizations. It would be premature to draw any strong conclusions on the basis of just one study, except perhaps to say that its results suggest that the differences between religious and secular social service agencies are likely to be more complex than we might expect. We need additional research of this sort to help us develop a coherent picture of reli-

gion's consequences for organizational behavior. Until a larger body of solid research develops in this subject, the correct answer to the question—are religious social services better than secular social services?—is: *we do not know*.

Is public funding the key kind of partnership between government and congregations?

Funding relationships are only one sort of possible collaboration between congregations and government. Non-financial collaborations might include government agencies calling specific churches from time to time, asking them to provide free groceries or money to clients, parole offices or other government agencies referring people to congregation-based AA or NA groups, congregations “adopting” or “mentoring” poor families referred to them by local welfare agencies, and so on.

The potential expansion of financial relationships—government agencies funding programs run by congregations—has received the most attention and seems to generate the most enthusiasm (from some) and dismay (from others), but these may not be the most important kind of congregation-government collaboration that we will see in the future. It is not, for example, the most common kind of collaboration existing today. Although only three percent of congregations currently receive government funding, 11 percent somehow collaborate with government agencies on social service projects. This means that about twice as many congregations somehow collaborate with government in a way not involving money than receive public funds in support of their work. Similarly, a recent effort to catalogue *new* government-FBO collaborations found that about one-third did not involve financial relationships (Sherman, 2000). Non-financial kinds of partnerships between congregations and government deserve attention.

To what extent is the relationship between government funding and “faith-based” activity top-down rather than bottom-up?

This question is related to the point I made earlier about the extent to which congregation-based social services are already largely done in collaboration with other organizations, including secular nonprofits and government. This embeddedness of religious social services within larger institutional environments surely also characterizes non-congregational religious social services, an observation that motivates a question: Will new government-religion partnerships emerge because government reaches out to and funds or otherwise supports *existing* efforts of congregations and other religious organizations—this is what I mean by bottom-up—or will new funding opportunities for religious organizations initiated by government agencies at various levels essentially create new efforts, as people and individuals shift their activities and start new efforts in response to new opportunities for financial support?

The popular image, I think, is the bottom-up one—the underlying assumption is that there is all this great “faith-based” work happening out there and government should find ways to support it. But it is clear that at least some

social service activity carried out by religious organizations emerged in response to new opportunities and organizing efforts that actually have their source in secular nonprofits or in government. Many congregation-based food programs, for example, would not exist were they not organized and supported by secular food banks and local governments. I think we need to consider the extent to which the new funding opportunities and emphases inspired by the charitable choice movement might call forth organizations and efforts that were not there before and would not be there now were it not for this new climate. That kind of development raises different issues and concerns than one in which the predominant pattern is that already-existing efforts simply receive new support.

Will expanding government/religion partnerships have unintended consequences?

The intentional and well-meaning efforts of fallible human beings with limited knowledge often produce consequences that we did not intend. On the subject at hand, I can think of four potentially important kinds of unintended consequences of aggressive efforts to expand partnerships between government and religious organizations.

Opportunism. Outright fraud—an organization pretending to be religious simply for the purpose of enhancing its chances to receive public funding—is always a possibility, but I am thinking of a more subtle kind of opportunism. Consider the following example: Recently, the United States Department of Health and Human Services issued a request-for-proposals (RFP) soliciting applications for grants to fund coalition building and service coordination around domestic violence issues. In the spirit of charitable choice, this RFP stated that priority would be given to proposals from coalitions led by religious organizations. In one county I know, the secular nonprofit organization that would have been the natural lead organization for such a project—it has considerable experience and expertise in coalition building—instead sought out a religious nonprofit, a small Catholic women’s shelter, to take the lead. This shelter would have been a natural participant in a coalition of organizations seeking money in response to this RFP, but it had no experience or expertise in larger coalition building or service coordination. It was chosen as the lead organization, at least on paper, only because the RFP stated that applications would be given extra points if a religious organization is the lead.

As it happens, this effort fell apart before a grant proposal was submitted, but this is an instructive example nonetheless. If government (or, for that matter, foundation) funding streams start to systematically prefer (as opposed to simply refrain from discriminating against) religious organizations, it is reasonable to expect various sorts of organizational jockeying designed to increase a proposal’s likelihood of being funded. I believe it is important to recognize the potential for this kind of dynamic, and to consider the possibility that charitable-choice inspired preferences for funding religious organizations—even if

they wind up passing constitutional muster— might very well distort on-the-ground organizational dynamics in undesirable ways.

A second potential unintended consequence of the charitable choice movement is that it may *increase competition for clients and funding among nonprofit social service organizations*. The charitable choice movement, it should be noted, has been focused on redirecting existing social service funding so that more of it goes to religious organizations, not on expanding the overall size of the human service funding pool. As I write, many states are in a time of budget surpluses, some of which, in some states, is being used to increase the amount of money spent on social services. But this time of surplus is not likely to last forever, and in the next wave of debate over welfare policy the question of reducing federal block grants to states for social services probably will be on the table. If the charitable choice movement leads to, say, a 5 or 10 percent increase in the number of congregations and other religious organizations competing for a pool of money that is not expanding—or even decreasing—that would be a noticeable increase in competition for funds among nonprofit organizations. Conventional wisdom notwithstanding, increasing competition does not always lead to increased efficiency and better quality products or services. The end result of increased competition among nonprofit social service agencies might well be a weaker overall social service sector. Even if the sector as a whole is not, in the end, weakened by such increased competition, it is reasonable to ask what will have been accomplished if the result of these efforts to bring more religious organizations into the social service arena is simply to have shifted resources from one set of organizations to another. Recall that this shift cannot, at present, be justified by saying that religious social services are better for the needy than are secular social services. That is far from clear.

Neither bigger nor more is necessarily better. There are two different senses in which the involvement of religious organizations in social services might be “expanded.” Expansion could occur by making existing programs bigger, or it could occur by involving more religious organizations in social service work. Somewhat counter-intuitively, even if existing faith-based programs are the most excellent, high-quality programs going, expansion of either sort—especially fast expansion—is not necessarily a good idea. Even if existing efforts are excellent, and expansion is pursued with best intentions of enlarging or replicating this excellence, neither sort of expansion will necessarily realize that intention.

Cnaan (1999), for example, describes the challenges faced by a Philadelphia congregation that was supporting several Alcoholics Anonymous and other substance abuser groups. The city of Philadelphia, after cutting its own publicly-funded AA program, began having its probation and parole officers refer offenders with substance abuse problems to the church’s programs. This was a new partnership between government and a congregation—one that did not involve a financial relationship. The consequence of this new partnership was

that the church was overwhelmed by all the new clients and had great difficulty managing the expansion. Vandalism increased, thefts and damage to their building occurred, and volunteers who worked at the congregation complained of abusive behavior by clients. The moral is that a congregation-based program or effort that is very successful at one level of operation may not be equally successful when it is expanded. New government collaborations, with or without funding, might lead to program expansion that then presents its own challenges for congregations to manage. Bigger is not necessarily better.

Neither is “more” necessarily better, in the following sense. Even if the 3 percent of congregations that received government money before charitable choice are doing the most excellent, most high-quality programming possible, it does not mean that the next 3 percent—those who seek funds in a new environment where they are easier to obtain—will be equally high quality. By definition, the religious organizations that seek government funds in a climate where such partnerships are encouraged and celebrated are a different kind of organization than those that started and operated programs, and that sought and obtained outside support before it was the fashionable thing to do. Maybe whatever it was that led congregations and religious organizations to develop programs and forge partnerships with government before presidential candidates’ celebratory remarks about such partnerships, before major attention from mass media, and before aggressive outreach to religious organizations on the part of some government agencies is, in fact, essential to their success. As the charitable choice movement gathers steam, it will be important to track the characteristics and operations of religious organizations that are brought into this work by the movement itself.

Conclusion

We are in a moment of enthusiasm about the role that religious organizations play in our social welfare system, and a moment of high interest in expanding that role and creating new kinds of partnerships between government and religious organizations. These partnerships are portrayed by some as the potential cornerstone of our future welfare system and the solution to many difficult problems caused by poverty. They are portrayed by others as the harbinger of disaster. I think they are neither. Religious organizations will play an important role in our future social welfare system, but that is not new. Welfare reform has brought with it some new opportunities and dangers in this arena, and I think we should chart a course that avoids both naive triumphalism about the opportunities and exaggerated fears about the dangers. Social scientists and journalists should instead engage in realistic, pragmatic, and clear-headed assessment of the possibilities—and limits—of religion’s role in our social welfare system. In this chapter I have tried to help us along that path by providing some basic facts about congregations’ social service activities, and also by raising some broader questions that are worth attending to as we move into the future.

Issues to Keep an Eye On

Many religiously based social service providers already receive government funds of some sort. To what extent does religion play a key part in the services delivered by such organizations? If there is religious content to the social services, does collaboration with government in fact hamper the religious activities? How accurate is the assumption that those who run religiously-based social services want to include religious content in their services? How accurate is the assumption that, when religious social service providers do want to include religious content of a non-proselytizing sort (religious symbols on walls, prayer before meals, discussions with clients about religion), they are constrained from doing this by their government collaborations?

A religious social service provider which includes religious content in its services might be compared with a functionally similar one that does not include religious content. How, if at all, are two such organizations different? Is one more effective than the other?

The California Faith-Based Initiative is a state-level instantiation of the charitable choice movement. It is particularly fascinating because it sets up a public funding stream to which only religious organizations are eligible to apply. Which organizations were funded through this initiative? How many had received government contracts before? How many were first-time recipients? What activities are being funded through this Initiative? Do they have religious content? What are the constitutional implications of a state government establishing a funding stream for which only religious organizations need apply?

As a result of the charitable choice movement, there now are federal, state, and local government funding streams to which religious organizations are being explicitly encouraged to apply. What are the on-the-ground consequences of this sort of charitable-choice-inspired encouragement for nonprofit organizations in the relevant field? Does competition for government money increase? Do nonprofits seek out religious collaborators to enhance their chances of funding?

Mississippi's Faith & Families program was an effort to involve congregations in mentoring relationships with poor people, and it sometimes is cited as a model by charitable choice advocates. In fact, the program was a failure which was stopped after a short time, mainly, I believe, for lack of interest on the part of congregations. How did this initiative come to be? Why did it fail?

How many of the "faith-based" programs funded through California's, Indiana's, or other states' faith-based initiatives were pre-existing programs run by religious organizations? How many were developed in response to enhanced opportunities for funding?

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