



Mainline Protestant Strategies to Maintain Connections
Between Faith Communities and Their Nonprofits:
Findings from the Faith and Organizations Project

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Historic Roots of Protestant Christians in the U.S.

As their name suggests, Protestant denominations originated in Europe as a formal and declared protest against the structure and practices of the Catholic Church in the 16th century, during the period that became known as the Reformation. Three root beliefs have historically characterized uniquely Protestant theological commitments: justification by grace through faith rather than works; the priesthood of believers, meaning that God relates to individuals directly, rather than through church leaders; and the Bible as the primary authority in lived faith, rather than tradition or ecclesiastical authority.

The multiple founders and traditions within Protestantism branched into the diverse array of denominational families which are evident today. Examples of modern expressions of Protestantism in the U.S. today include Anabaptist, Baptist, Adventist, Congregationalist, Nazarene, Pentecostal, Charismatic and Reformed denominations, as well as non-denominational churches. A collection of denominations with a strong presence in American religious history became known as the core "mainline" groups, though that label today is not limited to these denominations: Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and American Baptist. The rise of evangelicalism became a distinguishable movement in the 18th century, about 200 years after the Reformation. African American denominations, founded in the legacy of slavery and segregation, include AME (African Methodist Episcopal), National Baptist, and many independent Pentecostal groups.

The revivalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries went hand in hand with the development of a "Benevolent Empire"—a proliferation of home mission agencies, voluntary societies, and religiously based social services, driven by the earnest desires of revival-era Christians to show the "fruits of conversion." Many of the hospitals, schools and other nonprofits founded in this era survive today. In response to the social forces of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization, Christian activism was a blend of relief aid, calls for personal spiritual repentance and society-wide moral reform, and advocacy on controversial social issues such as child labor and abolition. Protestants generally accepted the charge laid down by the editor of *The Watchman*, a leading Baptist publication, who wrote in 1857: "It is ours, not only to fit ourselves and others for a better world, but to labor to make this world better."

As social gospel theology developed in the early 20th century with a focus on economic justice, it was embraced by some Protestant groups and rejected by others, leading to a definitive split between Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism. For Evangelicals this became known as the Great Reversal, a time when many congregations and denominations renounced social activism to focus on evangelistic outreach and personal discipleship. As a branch of the evangelical movement, fundamentalism became distinct in the early 1900s, embracing conservative theological principles and cultural values.

Among the many Protestant branches, distinctive beliefs and practices cluster around such topics as baptism, speaking in tongues, the process of salvation, ecumenism, and the role of women in the church, as well as the role of sacraments and use of liturgy. Significant diversity also exists in church polity, governance, and regional structures. There are also a rich variety of interpretations and emphases surrounding charitable care of others or social justice, in relation to evangelistic activities.

Despite this great diversity, the Mainline, Evangelical and African American communities share several core characteristics: a common identity as Christian and Protestant, as distinct from Christian and Catholic or Orthodox; a core theological framework featuring faith in Christ, the

Bible as a sacred text, and personal spiritual practices—though how these elements are defined and prioritized varies quite widely; and a worshiping community in which the congregation is the organizational and spiritual center—though how congregations are related in denominational polity also varies. The separate sections on Mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, and the Black Church give further details on the beliefs and systems which characterize each faith community and how these relate to their organizations.

Mainline Protestant Justice and Charity Work in the U.S.

About a fourth of American congregations may be identified as Mainline or Mainstream Protestant, including American Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian (USA), United Church of Christ, United Methodist, Disciples of Christ, Reformed Church in America, and several smaller denominations. While there is significant diversity in the various denominations represented in Mainline Protestantism, and among the churches within each denomination, a number of studies have documented their overall "this-worldly" orientation and active public presence. Mark Chaves, director of the National Congregations Study, summarizes their involvement, in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*:

Mainline congregations are more likely to engage in and encourage activities that build connections between congregations and the world around them. They are more likely to engage in social services, encourage educational activity (except sponsor their own elementary or high schools), interact with other congregations across traditional religious boundaries, and open their buildings to community groups. Mainline congregations appear more likely than congregations in other traditions to act as stewards of civil society rather than as one component of civil society.

Mainline Protestants' active role as "stewards of civil society" has historical and theological roots. Episcopal, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Quakers were among the first religious groups to arrive in America, and their influence seeped into the foundations of the new nation. Protestantism continued to enjoy a position of prominence in American culture and civic life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Protestant church buildings often occupied the literal and figurative center of the community, drawing on historical precedent in the Puritan ideal of a "city upon a hill." In response to growing urban poverty, congregations responded with a wide array of charitable activities such as soup kitchens and caring visitors who provided both practical assistance and moral uplift. They founded an abundance of hospitals, mission societies, social work agencies, educational institutions, and cultural organizations. Many of these initiatives eventually spun off from their founding churches and became separately incorporated nonprofits—some maintaining strong ties to the faith community, others becoming increasingly secular in their management and systems of support.

In the mid 19th century through the early 20th century, American Protestantism was indelibly shaped by the emergence of the social gospel movement. The major spokesperson for this movement was Walter Rauschenbusch, whose influential works included *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) and *A Theology of the Social Gospel* (1917). Faced with growing economic disparities, labor abuses and urban ills that accompanied the industrial revolution, as well as the perceived acquiescence of Protestant churches to these injustices, Rauschenbusch and others argued that it was the primary duty of the church to reorganize society on principles of love and justice. Social gospel theology shifted the locus of the gospel from the individual to the social, emphasizing that the Kingdom of God "is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven." The dialogue on social justice has been carried forward in the Mainline community by eminent theologians such as William

Herzog, III and Marcus Borg.

Mainline Protestant churches continue to wrestle with social gospel theology, with great diversity of interpretation on how and to what extent this paradigm should be embraced today. The guiding principle of social concern remains strong in the Mainline church tradition. This is seen, for example, in the mission statement of Frankford Group Ministry: "We work with our neighbors and partners to empower the people of Frankford by building stronger families and a stronger community. ...Since 1979 FGM has remained a beacon of hope. Empowerment in action means working together to create a viable community of faith and a vital community of hope." FGM fulfilled this mission primarily through emergency assistance, a parenting program, a summer youth program, a program to serve families at risk of having a child removed from their home, and other services to strengthen youth and families.

As FGM's example illustrates, social concern is most often identified with services to meet needs in the community, rather than advocacy to address systemic roots of social injustice. Mainline churches support programs of service to the poor and needy at a higher rate than other religious groups, while engaging in lower levels of politically oriented activity. One way that many Mainline Protestant churches express their social concern is by supporting ecumenical social action projects or umbrella organizations that may achieve the goals of both charity and justice.

Mainline Protestant congregants are generally more likely to embrace the value of social concern than to be able to articulate its theological underpinnings. Parishioners tend to be more politically and theologically conservative than their church leaders, and clergy tend to be more conservative than national denominational leaders. Ministers in the Mainline Protestant churches are typically expected to be seminary trained, and most Mainline Protestant seminaries emphasize social justice. Thus, ministers and denominational headquarters may have different agendas than local congregations. Denominational headquarters may assume certain values are a "given" only to discover that some local churches do not agree. For example, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has long struggled with the ordination of homosexuals. While the national denomination supports the ordination of homosexuals, many local congregations do not support it and have threatened to leave the denomination if forced to accept it. As a result, local Mainline Protestant outreach tends to coalesce around issues with broad consensus, like helping those who are homeless, rather than taking up contentious causes like national health care or homosexual marriage rights.

Differences in church polity influence how different churches within the Mainline Protestant community respond organizationally to social justice issues, and how church leaders are involved. In some denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church USA and the Disciples of Christ, ministers are "called" or hired directly by the church, and the pastor's community involvement will generally reflect the priorities of the congregation. In others, such as the United Methodist Church, ministers are assigned by the denomination to congregations for variable lengths of time, and part of their assignment can be to provide leadership to specific ministries, such as the example of Frankford Group Ministry where the executive director was a pastor assigned to the organization. Mainline Protestant polity generally provides for a congregational leadership body that conducts the business of the church, such as the Session of elected Elders in the Presbyterian Church (USA), or the elected Board of Members in the United Methodist Church. In principle, any social outreach a church commits to has been voted on by the church leadership, which gives it official sanction. Unlike Evangelical congregations, where church leaders typically provide direct oversight of a congregation's charitable activities, pastors in many Mainline churches cannot venture to begin a social outreach ministry without first seeking

official congregational support. Clergy often play an important role, however, by serving in an advisory capacity as a source of inspiration and counsel.

Members of Mainline Protestant congregations tend to be higher educated and to enjoy higher socio-economic status than the general population, and also tend to be older than the average U.S. adult population. Membership trends among many Mainline groups have been affecting outreach. Six Mainline denominations (Episcopal, Moravian, Congregational Christian Church, Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ and United Methodists) have had negative growth rates—some losing up to a third of their membership. This trend resulted in smaller, often aging congregations, and fewer human and financial resources available for social action. This tendency led Frankford Group Ministry to close toward the end of the study because its four congregations no longer had the membership and resources to sustain the organization in an economic downturn. Despite these changes, the Mainline Protestant faith community continues to provide a considerable volume of charitable relief and social services, and to exert a significant influence on public life.

Organizations and Faith Communities Participating in the Study

This study looked at Mainline Protestant agencies and congregational clusters serving a variety of community needs—including food, utility assistance, affordable housing, homelessness, job assistance, senior services, counseling, school supplies, and programs for children and youth. Particular attention was given to the way that these nonprofits relate to the faith based communities from which they originated.

Some of the programs – Frankford Group Ministry, SPAN (Severna Park Assistance Network), and GEDCO (Govans Ecumenical Development Corporation)—were founded by an ecumenical coalition of congregations. A few were founded by or affiliated with a single congregation or denomination (Kaleidoscope! Children’s Arts Camp; Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services). The Lutheran refugee assistance network, though a national organization working through local Lutheran Children and Family Service entities, also relied on individual congregations for support and outreach. Other groups, such as Habitat, connected with a variety of Mainline churches alongside other faith groups and non-religious organizations.

Christian Temple, affiliated with the Disciples of Christ denomination, offers a good example of the multiple organizational commitments developed by the majority of Mainline churches. The church actively contributes to Chesapeake Habitat for Humanity with both monetary and in-kind donations. The church helps maintain a pastoral counseling center, by advertising for it and sending referrals to the center. In addition, the church prepares meals for Lazarus Caucus, a local homeless shelter, has sent significant contributions for 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina relief, and served as the occasional host site for the local Catonsville Children’s Theatre. The church also started its own children’s program, Kaleidoscope! Arts Camp, which attracts a majority of participants from outside the church.

In many cases Mainline Protestant churches will work together and form an organization to provide centralized outreach. These separately incorporated 501(c)(3) agencies are largely dependent on contributions, donations, and volunteers, and in some cases grants. For example, Severna Park Assistance Network (SPAN) is supported by 14 Mainline Protestant churches, run by a paid director, and staffed by volunteers. This organization tends not to report back to their church sponsors on a regular basis, nor is there any day-to-day oversight by the sponsors. SPAN’s services are available to anyone in need, regardless of religious affiliation. Although many of the volunteers and staff are affiliated with one of the sponsoring churches, they do not

attempt to proselytize clients. Volunteers are generally drawn to SPAN because they agree with the organization's objectives and not because it is a specifically Christian organization in origin.

As SPAN illustrates, ecumenical participation is the norm among Mainline-connected organizations, and many of them featured involvement by non-Christian partners as well, including synagogues, mosques, schools, banks, community organizations, businesses, and city and state government entities. This is reflective of the Mainline Protestant values of tolerance and openness to other religious views, especially where this openness is seen as advancing the practical objectives of the organization:

The only way to do it is to go across the boundaries and work with your ecumenical partners...if there is a Mosque in the area they would be invited to send representatives, the synagogue would be invited. I see it as the very heart of the gospel that we are doing as a people of faith.

This openness, however, may have limits. For example, at a GEDCO board meeting, it was proposed to change the organization's mission statement from: "In partnership with faith communities, GEDCO provides affordable housing..." to "Motivated by the shared values of our faiths, GEDCO provides..." The change was intended to reflect the fact that the GEDCO had recently expanded to include organizations without any religious aspect or affiliation, and to indicate greater inclusiveness that was not religiously restricted. Several individuals raised concerns that the change would be misunderstood by GEDCO's member organizations as representing a shift away from the faith based motivations of its founders. The motion was shelved. This incident offers an example of how a board functions as a steward of an organization's identity, and also how Mainline groups walk a fine line between openness and secularization. While groups like GEDCO are willing to create ties with secular agencies and government entities, they do not want their identity to be defined by these ties.

Practical Theology

In general, two strands of practical theology can be observed working hand in hand in Protestant organizations. On one hand, most individual acts of support for nonprofits—whether in-kind donations, financial contributions or volunteering—come from a sense of charity whose American roots date back to the Puritan precept that caring for those in need is a mark of the pious Christian life. On the other hand, participation in nonprofit activity and ecumenical organizations also draws on social gospel principles that seek to transform the systemic roots of poverty and injustice, in the prophetic tradition of protest. These dual callings are fulfilled through a complex mixture of individual action, projects by the local corporate church body, and initiatives within a denominational or ecumenical structure.

The practical theology associated with Mainline Protestantism emphasizes tangible demonstrations of God's care for the poor and vulnerable as an expression of spirituality. Serving others is an act of obedience to God. As a staff member at Habitat for Humanity explains, "ending poverty, providing housing, being involved in advocacy for the poor, involving congregations in hands on mission is all about ministry and all about faith. I am a very firm believer that one's faith is something that is active, and you live it out. And there's no better way of doing that than building houses for the poor." These themes reflect the ongoing influence of the Social Gospel movement of the early twentieth century, which called Christians to advocate for social justice and support programs of outreach for the poor as a central tenet of faith. Embedded in many social programs is the belief that God's Kingdom of justice, reconciliation and social harmony can, to a meaningful degree, arrive in history as a result of human efforts.

While Christians are uniquely called to this effort, the scope of the need calls them to join with like-minded others.

Many of those interviewed for this study cite Jesus' teachings, including his parable of the Good Samaritan, and his assertion in Matthew 25:40 that caring for the poor, hungry and oppressed is akin to caring for Christ himself. The emphasis is on praxis over proclamation. A Presbyterian minister, one of the founders of the ecumenical agency GEDCO, shares this perspective: "I have always seen involvement in the community as an integral part of expressing one's faith." Organizations founded by Mainline Protestants typically prefer to show, rather than tell, the gospel, and they believe they best share their faith by embodying it in service. Overall, Mainline Protestantism tends to be significantly less focused on personal conversion as a motive for outreach than Evangelicalism. Evangelism—persuading others to profess Christian faith and join the church—is not absent, but tends to be implied rather than explicitly verbalized, and to be subordinated to acts of service and advocacy.

Personal faith is largely considered a private matter, though it leads to public engagement. Thus when Mainline Protestants from various denominations come together to advocate on an issue, they would tend to focus on their shared social goal, while rarely making explicit their individual religious motivations or discussing differences in beliefs. While volunteers in Mainline programs are often deeply motivated by their faith, the organizational culture does not encourage them to be forward about their religious identity, particularly in an interfaith context. A Bread for the World staff member shares an example:

In 2007 we had an interfaith convocation at the Washington National Cathedral. Everybody knew that we were a Christian organization, but we have Buddhists, Jewish rabbis, and we have Muslims, and we came there around the issue of hunger. We weren't there to try to proselytize or anything. It wasn't so much that we were downplaying [religion], but we were just really dealing with the issue. It doesn't matter if you are a Jew or Muslim or Christian, if you are hungry.

The privatized nature of faith leads many social service programs in a Mainline context to appear secular in content. Aside from being operated by or at a church, they may have few explicit indicators that the organization is a Christian organization, and might not advertise the fact that they are Christian. Whereas corporate prayer, religious conversations and biblical references are frequently found in programs sponsored by the Evangelical community, these are not typically integrated into Mainline programs. For example, the Disciples of Christ church, drawing on theological values of equality and inter-group understanding, sponsored a youth arts program intended to bring together youth from various racial backgrounds (though most of the participants ended up being white, middle class youth associated with the church). Program materials stressed unity and multiculturalism in general terms, with no overt theological references. Similarly, with the exception of activities directly associated with Christmas and Easter, Mainline organizational events appeared to be markedly nonreligious in their formatting. This was noted at board meetings, employee training sessions, volunteer appreciation events, fundraisers, and community outreach events.

These organizational characteristics reflect the embedded core values of human dignity and religious tolerance, which in the Mainline Protestant context is interpreted to mean that organizations should not attempt overtly to convert those they serve, and that individuals should not impose their religious views on others. Promoting certain moral values or behaviors may be important, but not promoting a particular church or "brand" of religion. In fact, many Mainline organizations would probably rapidly lose support if they openly proselytized, because of the strong belief that organizations should be comfortable environments for people of all religious

backgrounds. Thus the implicit character of religious expression in the Mainline context is largely consistent with the professional ethic of social workers. While professional training may not be a requirement for staff and volunteers, it is not likely to conflict with the existing organizational culture.

Habitat for Humanity exemplifies the embrace of religious tolerance. In the community studied in this project, Habitat's work relied on the active involvement of congregations from diverse faiths, many from the Mainline community. This involvement was spearheaded by individuals who would develop Habitat teams from their congregations who would work on a specific house. Each church-based team worked independently of each other, and each brought the values of their own tradition. So for example, the house completed by a Lutheran congregation had a Lutheran-led blessing ceremony, while different religious groups led the ceremonies for families living in the houses where they had worked. In the Mainline tradition which values religious diversity, this was considered a strength rather than a weakness of the organization.

Mainline congregations tend to occupy the moderate to liberal side of the theological spectrum, though congregants tend to be more politically conservative than their leaders—creating tensions on some social issues. Some Mainline denominations also experience a disconnect between the understanding of social ministry at the grassroots congregational level as personal acts of service and relief, and a greater emphasis on public policy advocacy and structural reform at the level of judicatories and denominational offices. In part, this reflects the theological tension between the ethic of personal responsibility, a value deeply woven into the historic fabric of American Protestantism, and a critical awareness of economic and political injustice as represented by the prophetic tradition in Scripture. Both strands are evident, for example, in GEDCO's self-description: *"GEDCO is committed to a just society that respects the dignity and worth of all people, values diversity, upholds community, encourages each person's contributions, and fosters growth toward personal independence."* This dual framework of social responsibility as both individual and structural presents a common bond in particular with the African American faith community.

Their theological emphasis on solidarity with the poor in praxis for the common good often leads Mainline Protestants to join with others in service and advocacy across denominational or interfaith lines. For example, this ministry leader affirms:

I absolutely believe that this is a Christian organization and all that we do is based in the Christian faith. Although what I have also found out in working with the Interfaith is that it also totally aligns with all of the Abrahamic faiths and as I continue to learn about other faiths, with other faiths as well. So I think that we all have that common calling to reach out to the poor, change the world, transform neighborhoods—all that comes from all of our faiths, not just Christianity.

Research indicates that Mainline churches provide volunteers, space, and funding for about twice as many organizations as Evangelical, Catholic and African American churches, and are also the most likely to connect with secular nonprofits and government agencies. This cooperative work includes public policy issues like national health care reform, disaster relief work, and ecumenical or interfaith coalitions such as SPAN and GEDCO. Many congregations also participate in local chapters of national initiatives like Habitat for Humanity. This tendency toward centralization and collaboration streamlines resources and prevents duplication of efforts at the local congregational level.

Pragmatism is a value that helps drive these partnerships and influences other aspects of how faith-based services are offered. Mainline Protestants tend to view the organizations that they

sponsor from a business standpoint and to make decisions about these ministries as would a business organization. If they are fulfilling their intended mission, then funding continues. The most dramatic example of this was seen during several GEDCO functions, when the executive director encouraged supporters to think of themselves as “shareholders” in the organization. Additionally, many of the Mainline Protestant organizations studied exhibited a willingness or even a preference to employ executive directors with professional business backgrounds. This professionalization is rooted in the middle class, educated character of Mainline demographics, and in the history of Mainline influence in the development of professional care societies and standards.

One Presbyterian minister, a founder and former board president of a retirement home, gave a retrospective account of the process of professionalization:

What we did before [the retirement home buildings] were even built ... was to hire a management company. Being a nonprofit and having a several million dollar a year operation, and having all volunteers on the board, you need some sort of professional management. If it were simply a housing unit type of situation it would be one thing, but when it comes to providing the nursing services and the food services and such, we felt that there was only one way to go, and that was to hire a firm that had experience—a management firm. And they take care of hiring all of the people.

This quote illustrates a common theme among Mainline organizations. Religious principles drive the goal of providing a particular service, such as a retirement home with nursing care—while professional management principles drive the process of achieving it.

In contrast to Catholic and Evangelical communities, the Mainline narrative in the U.S. does not include the perception of cultural marginalization. Mainline churches have historically felt a sense of responsibility to shape and lead society, not protect their members from it. With the exception of certain issues of personal morality, Mainline values have largely resonated with the values of the broader society. This is one reason that Mainline churches are less likely to start private schools than Catholics and Evangelicals; the values most cherished by many in the Mainline community—open-mindedness, religious tolerance, appreciation of diversity, the equal dignity of all people—are already embedded in the public school system. These values also create an affinity with the professional social work code of ethics, and many faith based organizations hired social workers as executive directors or key administrative staff, making it easier for Mainline churches to establish or partner with secular agencies offering similar services.

Stewardship and Strategies for Maintaining Connections

Among Mainline Protestants, stewardship is typically understood as garnering and managing resources – funding, in-kind supports and volunteers – for faith communities and organizations. In the larger sense of maintaining connections, however, a range of formal and informal guidance and support relationships also play a vital role.

The Protestant church in America has a long history of launching social welfare and health institutions that spin off as separate entities. As one faith community leader commented, "We come together for spiritual nourishment to help us do our work in the world and we are not social service organizations. So we can start something and hope that it spins off to maturity and independence. That's great."

The primary incubator for social agencies is the local church. The religious tradition stemming from the Protestant reformation emphasizes the local congregation as the primary vehicle for carrying out the mandates of faith in a community; denominational structures exist primarily to support and guide congregations in this task. In some denominations with highly centralized structures such as Lutherans and United Methodist, organizations may seek support from higher level adjudicatories, but often this support is limited and the conferences or synods expect organizations to primarily rely on congregations for assistance. For example, Lutherans organize social welfare at the synod level but involve congregations in all aspects of their work.

Thus for Mainline institutions, stewardship primarily involves maintaining connections with local congregations. The variety of congregational connections includes linkages with churches that helped to launch the organization, churches in the same denomination as the organization's affiliation, churches of all denomination in the same local community as the organization, or churches that support causes in the organization's niche; i.e., churches with environmental concern are likely to support more than one environmental organization. Congregational ties are achieved through board appointments, volunteers, and appeals for in-kind supports and funding, both as donations from individual members and as line items in the church's corporate budget. Many organizations are located on church property, often using the space at free or reduced cost. The organization provides the church with a place to refer people in need, and the church provides the program with connections with clients. A certain percentage of the board may be reserved for members of the supporting church(es), and organizations may tap their church community to fill staff positions. This is illustrated by SPAN, founded when thirteen Mainline Protestant churches came together to provide emergency assistance to individuals in the community. The organization was hosted on the property of one of the churches, and the board was made up of a representative from each church. Initially, most staff positions were filled by volunteers, mainly from the churches.

At the same time, a notable feature in the Mainline system is the use of national structures through regional conferences and associations. Similar to Catholic and Jewish structures, and in contrast to many Evangelical congregations, Mainline Protestant congregations typically contribute to their denomination's centralized budget and social service systems. Inter-denominational efforts, such as One Great Hour of Sharing, or community-based ecumenical coalitions also serve to channel resources. Certain types of services are commonly addressed at the national rather than the local level, such as international aid, disaster relief work, policy advocacy, and refugee ministries. The National Council of Churches helps to network these groups and denominational leaders at the national level.

The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services office in this study exemplified this blended strategy. Though the organization is chartered at the national level, it still sees individual congregations as a major component of its work. Using significant federal funding, LIRS passes funds through to regional offices often located within Lutheran Children and Family Services organizations, also chartered at the synod level for the region. Both the national and regional offices rely on individual congregations to host refugee families, with fundraising campaigns sent to individual congregations as well.

Thus, a church may maintain relationships with a complex array of faith-sponsored organizations: local nonprofits with a history of affiliation with the church, denominational programs, local chapters of national organizations, and regional or national ecumenical coalitions—in addition to partnerships with private secular and public entities. A study called the Organizing Religious Work Project found that Mainline Protestant churches are involved with an average of close to nine organizations for the purpose of outreach. For their part, Mainline-

sponsored organizations are likely to reach beyond Protestant denominations to Jews, Catholics, other religions and the secular community for support. In such a dense and complex organizational environment, an intentional effort is required to maintain the vitality of ties. Otherwise these linkages become weak and may be easily broken when a challenge arises, as in case of Frankford Group Ministry.

Mainline Protestant communities primarily understand stewardship in financial terms - as voluntary tithes and offerings given to the church, and as the Church's obligation to ensure that the monies are wisely spent and accounted. Church bodies appoint various boards to keep track of these monies and ensure that they are used in appropriate ways. Most Mainline Protestant churches have stewardship campaigns in which they encourage individual members and families to pledge their giving to the church for the upcoming year. Giving is typically seen as optional, unlike churches in the Evangelical tradition that emphasize tithing, or setting an expected threshold for member contributions. Thus Mainline Protestant church budgets have been experiencing strain, as some members do not feel obligated to raise their contribution as their income increases, or to continue giving if their income drops. This has led to a reorientation of funding strategies on the part of some organizations, generally towards private grants and government funding opportunities.

As follows from a financial interpretation of stewardship, oversight of Mainline Protestant organizations by the faith community is likely to manifest through the degree of support from local congregations. GEDCO and SPAN, for example, were spun off by their founding faith groups into stand alone 501(c)(3)s, and their day to day operations are not explicitly influenced by the founding faith. However, if these organizations are seen as straying from the goals of the original faith community, there may be a corresponding decline in contributions from the founding faith. Member organizations provide a substantial percentage of volunteer and financial support, and in return the organizations are careful to respect the sensitivities of those church bodies, avoiding engagement in activities that would endanger that relationship. Reciprocal aspects of this relationship are also present. Recognizing that coalition groups can provide more extensive services than a single congregation, the faith community generally appreciated and supported the work of these organizations, rather than seeking to challenge and micromanage.

Mainline organizations balance a uniquely religious constituency with largely secular organizational systems. Historically, as the dominant religious culture, Mainline Protestants intentionally mainstreamed their stewardship strategies of board appointments, fundraising, accountability and reporting structures so that they are largely identical to secular nonprofits. On the other hand, these structures are designed to produce outcomes that reflect the religious values of their supporting faith community. Mainline Protestant churches continue their relationship with the organizations they have helped to found in three main ways:

- 1. Accountability:** Organizations regularly submit reports to the founding faith group for review, usually on an annual basis. These reports attest to the organization's degree of success in meeting their objectives while maintaining their values. This includes testimonials from individuals served and a quantitative accounting of services delivered. Third-party audits of the organization's finances are also provided sometimes, but the audits are usually performed at the behest of private or public funding agencies, rather than mandated by the faith community. These annual reports also serve to establish the organization's credibility in the eyes of other potential funding sources, including private donors, foundations, and government programs.

2. Mutual Participation: The founding faith community usually maintains a presence in the spin-off organizations through delegates, committee members or board members who are active in both the organization and the founding faith community. In several cases the founders of the Mainline Protestant organizations were local clergy with thriving congregations. Even when these ministers were no longer spearheading organizational operations they generally continued their involvement by acting on the board of directors, regularly volunteering for service activities, and attending public functions. This mutual participation seemed to be driven primarily by feelings of personal investment, rather than motives of control or oversight.

3. Volunteer activities: All of the Mainline Protestant organizations relied heavily on volunteers from their constituent congregations and other sources. These volunteer efforts are where the twin goals of charity and social justice are most evident. For example, GEDCO's professional operation builds and supports innovative low income housing initiatives that reflect social gospel objectives. These initiatives draw their boards from the founding congregations and other constituencies. Another program under the GEDCO umbrella is a thriving charitable operation drawing in-kind goods and volunteers from member congregations to provide for the immediate needs of the poor in its neighborhood. While these two initiatives are linked at the organizational and board level, they function independently of each other.

One of the challenges that confront Mainline Protestants is that spin-off organizations develop constituencies within the churches who become closely identified with the spin-off organization. A congregation may have several different affinity groups connected with different organizations, sometimes vying for funds and volunteers. Because these constituencies are embedded in the congregation but may not include the leadership of the church, this sometimes makes it difficult for churches to effectively address shortcomings in the spin-off organizations they support. This tendency was evident in a Habitat for Humanity chapter studied for this project. This entity struggled to raise funds and draw constituencies. It primarily relied on the individual networks of key supporters, who were retired individuals active in their congregations. It was unclear how these congregational teams would continue if the lead organizer were no longer available.

Addressing Opportunities and Concerns

Organizational Transitions

Expansion of services and capacity seem to be the most common issue driving organizational transformation. During times of expansion, whether driven by demand or opportunity, the first step for most organizations is to turn to their faith community. For example, a large Lutheran organization took steps to increase its outreach to congregations as federal funding was cut. Periods of growth are also often times when the organization re-evaluates the way it applies its faith based mission and its connection to its faith community.

Umbrella organizations are also a valuable resource for groups with a national organizational base that are seeking to grow and expand capacity at the local level. The executive director of the Baltimore-based interfaith Habitat for Humanity described how they use their parent organization to expand capacity: "Habitat for Humanity International, right now they're working with us because we're growing so fast. They've sent in a consultant to work with us to help us figure out how to build more and all that. So they definitely watch to see how the affiliates are doing; and as they grow they send in consultants to help you figure out how to grow."

Highly visible successes can lead to organizational self-assessment, professional development, and transformation by inspiring and encouraging other ambitious efforts. For example, after GEDCO successfully navigated a string of increasingly daunting challenges to bring its largest and most ambitious housing projects to fruition, it found itself in possession of a dramatically expanded support base and organizational capacity. Many of the newly-added organizations were brought in as part of a campaign to demonstrate the breadth of community support for the housing project that the city of Baltimore was somewhat resistant to. Although they successfully grew their numbers, the degree to which those new members were actively involved was somewhat limited. In response, GEDCO implemented an extensive self-evaluation project in order to determine how best to use their newfound capabilities and to more clearly delineate the boundaries of their community. Ultimately they emerged with a clearer sense of self-identity, and fresh organizational focus.

Community Conflicts and Concerns

The relationship between faith-based organizations and the government has been a major area of contention in the Mainline community, reflecting both theological differences and practical concerns. On the one hand, some large Mainline faith-based organizations, such as Lutheran and Episcopal social service agencies, have long depended on public funding, even before the advent of the official policy of government openness to funding of religious social welfare organizations. For these agencies, the new policies allowed them to re-emphasize their connections to their founding faith and increased direct outreach to congregations. Other Mainline groups welcomed the option of federal funding as a means of expanding existing, previously privately-funded services. In many cases federal grants required matching support from the faith community, meaning that the funding stimulated rather than replaced volunteering and other congregational linkages. The religious tradition of such groups saw no theological conflict between government and churches partnering to achieve shared social goals. On the other hand, other groups in the Mainline tradition—most notably American Baptist—have a long history of cherishing the separation of church and state, and these groups have been vocal in their opposition to tax dollars being channeled through private religious organizations.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services offers an example of an organization that has balanced government funding with a religiously-rooted mission. While they rely on government dollars for their operations, they equally rely on their connection with congregations and religiously motivated volunteers to carry out the more relational side of their work:

As a government partner, we have necessarily emphasized professionalism and technocratic excellence in our programs, and these are strengths we hope to continue. However, as we place more emphasis on the impact and outcomes we hope to achieve, we are more aware that the long-term well-being of refugees and other vulnerable migrants is tied to the quality of their social and community connections. Thus, engaging volunteers, welcoming congregations, ethnic communities and strong families is not an optional or add-on component of our work, but rather the very foundation of what we do.

While divided over faith based initiatives in general, Mainline adherents are generally united in their view that government funds should not go to organizations that proselytize or that limit hiring to co-religionists. Most of the Mainline agencies participating in this study regularly hired staff from outside their denominational and religious orientation. For example, Christian Temple, a Disciples of Christ church, supports a pastoral counseling center whose executive director is Catholic, and GEDCO has had two Jewish executive directors despite being rooted in the local

Christian community. Additionally, none of these organizations have made efforts to quantify or evaluate the specifics of staff members' faiths.

One area of potential conflict relates to the lack of clarity of expectations between the faith community and their organizations. Nonprofits that spin off from a congregation achieve a greater measure of administrative independence and are not controlled in the way a denominationally-run program can be. Influence is largely exercised through voluntary means such as funding and volunteers. Yet despite the lack of formal control, congregations may still look to these organizations as being reflective of their cultural values and their religious mission of service or social justice. In interviews, faith community representatives were often able to detail specific expectations of the agencies they supported. These expectations may not be clearly communicated to the organization, however, until the organization crosses the line and does something that the faith community considers objectionable. Moreover, the obligations of the faith community toward the agency—beyond supplying material and human resources—are even less clear. Many interviewees admitted that they hadn't thought about the question. Mainline faith communities would thus benefit from reflecting on and articulating their expectations in relation to their organizations, and vice versa.

Current Economic Situation

While the structure of board appointments through congregations provides stable governance systems for mainline Protestant organizations, the ability of mainline Protestants to maintain their nonprofits as church membership ages and shrinks in numbers has become an urgent problem. This problem has only been compounded by the recent economic downturn, forcing some agencies to cut services, others like Frankford Group Ministry to close altogether.

The organizations that did well increasingly expanded the network of congregations and secular organizations that provided support. They developed a funding mix that relied increasingly on grants and government funds rather than increasingly dwindling resources of congregations and their members. They also maintained strong ties with their member organizations through active volunteer and in-kind resources.

Implications for Practice

- ❖ **Stewardship in the Mainline context is primarily perceived in pragmatic terms in relation to resource management;** thus maintaining accountability and fiscal transparency is a vital foundation for other kinds of linkages. Whether through formal evaluations or informal feedback, the faith community wants to know that their support is effectively producing benefit to those in need. Where no clear expectations or accountability systems exist, organizations and churches can work to make these processes more explicit. Organizations need to balance business models of fiscal responsibility with mission-driven models that preserve the essential linkage with faith.
- ❖ **The national economy and denominational demographics are compounding the financial struggles of Mainline Protestant organizations.** Survival tactics include broadening their base of congregational support; diversifying their sources to include government and foundation funding; emphasizing non-financial opportunities for support, such as volunteer time and in-kind donations; and providing faith partners with multiple options for involvement. For example, a Habitat for Humanity staff person explained, "Faith communities have basically four options of ways to get involved with the

agency"— church participation in building houses, partnerships with interfaith coalitions, grants from denominational agencies, and financial donations from churches.

- ❖ **Agencies need to recognize the vitality of strong informal relationships in their ability to carry forward their mission.** Besides financial instability, the risk in economically lean times is that organizations' sense of connectedness with congregations may decline along with their contributions, especially if stewardship is understood primarily as a financial transaction. The long-term value of these connections may be lost. Organizations and churches can take steps to sustain their commitment to shared values even when giving is down. They can do this by strengthening informal ties—e.g., communication media, channels of feedback, and opportunities for personal interaction.
- ❖ **In managing their relationships, churches and nonprofits connected with the Mainline community need to take the complexity of their support system into account.** Organizations typically are dependent on support from multiple congregations, and each congregation has multiple linkages with other groups in the community. This creates a complex support net in which particular links may be weak, but the overall fabric of social support in a community is relatively stable. If church groups place competing expectations on the nonprofits they support, or if nonprofits view one another as competitors rather than colleagues, they can damage their relationships with one another and undermine the system as a whole.
- ❖ **Religious tolerance is a hallmark Mainline Protestant value, and this has led to fruitful ecumenical and interfaith collaborations.** Mainline participation in these groups are most effective when they are supported by a reciprocal understanding: churches provide these coalition groups with extensive volunteer and financial support, and allow them to manage their efforts with minimal day-to-day oversight; in exchange, the coalition effectively delivers services that are important to the values of the Mainline faith community, and is sensitive not to engage in activities that their supporters would consider offensive or overly controversial.
- ❖ **Maintaining a distinct religious identity is an ongoing challenge.** As with other religious groups, Mainline-sponsored organizations face pressures from government regulations, professional standards, and client and stakeholder expectations. Because embedded Mainline values are largely consistent with a professional social service environment, this has not produced as much conflict as in other religious communities (though of course tensions do at times arise). However, this heightens the challenge of maintaining a distinct identity and relationship with the faith community.
- ❖ **A common misunderstanding is that because Mainline organizations do not proselytize or openly display their religious roots, faith is not important to these groups.** On the contrary, these nonprofit organizations were founded on the momentum of beliefs about God's expectations for Christian involvement in the world, and ongoing support for these organizations is often motivated by deeply-held religious commitments. This is illustrated by GEDCO's resistance to changing its mission statement in a way that would have weakened its identity as being rooted in the faith community. Strengthening ties with the faith community does not mean making the faith element more public or more compulsory, but it may entail affirming and enriching the private, voluntary religious experience of participants.

- ❖ **Volunteering for nonprofit organizations is an important form of expressing and nurturing faith.** Personal spiritual growth is emphasized in Mainline Protestant religion, and spiritual growth is linked to showing care and compassion to others and (for some groups) seeking social justice. The relationship between nonprofit and faith community is thus strengthened when volunteering is understood as a two-way street: The church supplies volunteers that enable the organization to carry out its mission at minimal cost; the nonprofit supplies the church an avenue for its members to express their spiritual values. Emphasizing the reciprocal nature of this relationship keeps the church satisfied that its investment is meeting a congregational need as well as helping the community. This point was highlighted during an interfaith organization's volunteer appreciation dinner, where the director described the findings of a survey of their agency volunteers. The overwhelming response to the question of why people volunteered their time and effort was because the agency allowed them to “serve people in need.”
- ❖ **Linkages with nonprofit organizations make a church's values visible to those outside the church who share these values.** Although Mainline programs do not overtly seek to convert clients to their faith, a church's sponsorship of social welfare programs may indirectly attract new members, as individuals in the community are drawn to participate in the church's relationship with an organization as a volunteer or supporter.
- ❖ **The lack of training and guidance for individuals appointed as board members to mainline Protestant organizations appears as a clear weakness.** For example, SPAN was founded by a coalition of churches to meet the needs of individuals in poverty. As the need in the community grew, SPAN also expanded its staff and services. However, the board has remained informal and relatively uninvolved, limiting the organization's capacity to address the growing demand. In the case of Frankford Group Ministry, the lack of skilled support from the board was one factor in the organization's inability to raise sufficient funds to maintain its operations. Organizations need guidance on selecting and training board members, particularly when they draw board positions from supporting congregations. Church members are often thrown into these positions without much preparation. In a struggling economy, providing materials and structures to train board as well as staff in their governance roles becomes increasingly important.
- ❖ **Umbrella organizations offer a potentially useful tool for training, supervising professional development, setting standards, monitoring outcomes, fundraising, and networking.** Lutheran social service organizations were in the process of founding a national organization at the start of the research period. However, since many organizations do not belong to umbrella groups beyond local interfaith coalitions, congregations may also offer a venue for providing this training and support.

Information about the Faith & Organizations Project

Since the late 1990s, practitioners and researchers from different faiths have been working collaboratively to understand the connection between faith communities and the non-profits they have created, sponsored or supported. The *Faith and Organizations Project* also has explored ways that faith traditions play out in organizational structure and practice, the role of faith based organizations in their service sectors, and faith based organizations' interactions with the people they serve.

This publication is based on findings from the Project's second study, *Maintaining Vital Connections Between Faith Communities and their Organizations*. The project was funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc., with research activities beginning in March 2008. It examines the relationship between faith communities and organizations founded by Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Evangelicals, Quakers, and African American churches in the Mid-Atlantic (Philadelphia and the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan areas), Midwest (Ohio and Chicago) and South (South Carolina). This report provides details on strategies to maintain connections for Mainline Protestants, outlines unique relationship challenges, and suggests practical ways that faith communities and their organizations could strengthen their relationship and ensure that faith based organizations receive appropriate support and guidance.

Our first report, *Overview Report on Project Findings*, offers a general summary of key project findings and contrasts religious strategies while our second report, *Comparing Strategies to Maintain Connections Between Faith Communities and Organizations Across Religions*, includes findings for all of the religious traditions in the study as well as an introductory overview of key concepts and a conclusion with comparative findings. A series of best practices documents on topics covered in both reports is in development. These products, along with publications from our pilot study and other information on the project, are available on the project website at <http://www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu/>.

Suggested Reading List

Robert Wuthnow & John Evans (2002). *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Nancy Ammerman (2005). *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Randall Balmer (1996). *Grant Us Courage: Travels along the Mainline of American Protestantism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tipton, Steven M. (2008). *Public Pulpits: Methodists and Mainline Churches in the Moral Argument of Public Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

