

## ABSTRACT

### Taken for Granted? Exploring the Relationships Between Social Service Agencies and Religious Congregations

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Religious congregations play a significant role in the provision of social services in American communities. While some congregations establish their own social service programs, most do not. Instead, the majority of congregations providing social services do so by forming relationships with local service organizations. To date, however, few studies have examined these relationships in detail. Drawing on interview and survey data collected from agency directors, this research explores the relationships that exist between congregations and social service agencies in one Texas city. Research findings suggest that there are four primary types of relationships that develop between congregations and service agencies. These relationship types are identified and discussed. In addition, attention is given to the ways that service agencies utilize various congregational resources in these relationships and the ways that agencies negotiate religious and secular boundaries with the congregations that they relate to.

Taken for Granted? Exploring the Relationships Between  
Social Service Agencies and Religious Congregations

by

Edward Clayton Polson, M.S.W., M.Div.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Sociology



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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts

Approved by the Thesis Committee



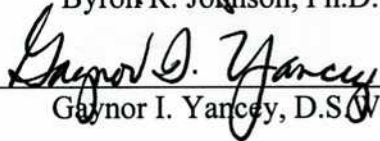
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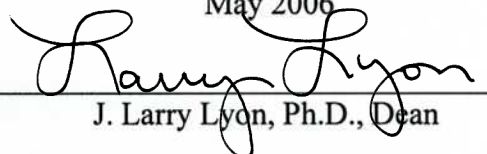
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Accepted by the Graduate School  
May 2006



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my entire thesis committee for guiding me through the research and writing of this paper. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Chris Bader for encouraging me to pick a research topic that I care so deeply about and for introducing me to the qualitative research process. I would like to thank Dr. Byron Johnson and Dr. Gaynor Yancey for sharing invaluable insight into the work of congregations and faith-based organizations. I am grateful to Dr. Bob Wineburg for allowing me to use research instruments from a study that he conducted in the 1990s in Greensboro, North Carolina. Much of the initial direction of this study was shaped by discussions that I had with Dr. Wineburg. Finally, I would like to express much gratitude to my wife for her encouragement and support throughout this process.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Over the last ten years scholarly interest in the social service activities of religious congregations has increased significantly (Chaves, 2004; Cnaan et al., 2002; Grettenberger, 2001; Hodgkinson et al., 1993; Silverman, 2000; Wineburg, 2001). As a result of efforts to secure public funding for congregational social service programs, many congregational researchers have begun to examine more closely the number and types of social services provided by congregations (Ammerman 2001, 2005; Bartkowski and Regis, 2003; Billingsly, 1999; Chaves and Tsitsos, 2001; Cnaan et al., 2002; Grettenberger, 2001; Hill, 1998; Dudley and Roozen, 2001; Silverman, 2001; Wineburg, 2001; Wuthnow, 2004). The most recent national studies suggest that congregations do not typically establish their own social service programs, but engage in service provision by supporting the work of local social service agencies (Ammerman, 2005; Chaves, 2004; Wuthnow, 2004). Unfortunately few studies have examined these relationships between congregations and local social service agencies in detail. Therefore the focus of this paper is on exploring agency – congregation relationships in one Texas city in order to understand more clearly the types of relationships that exist between these organizations. In addition, this study will examine how congregational resources are utilized within these relationships, and how local social service agencies negotiate secular and religious boundaries with the congregations they relate to.



## *Review of the Literature*

### *Congregational Social Services*

National studies have revealed that almost nine out of ten congregations in the U.S. report sponsoring at least one social or community service program (Cnaan et al., 2002; Dudley and Roozen, 2001; Hodgkinson et al., 1994). Studies also show that congregations are most likely to provide services that benefit the poor, the young, and the elderly (Ammerman, 2005; Chaves, 2004; Cnaan et al., 2002; Dudley and Roozen, 2001). Among congregational researchers, however, there has been disagreement over the extent to which congregations are actually involved in social service provision. In the first nationally representative study of American congregations Mark Chaves (2004) found that only 57 percent of congregations support social service programs. In addition, he found that the average congregation reports involvement in only one program (Chaves, 2004). This contrasts with earlier studies that suggest higher levels of mean involvement (Cnaan et al., 2002; Dudley and Roozen, 2001). For instance, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found that on average congregations reported supporting 39 social service programs (Cnaan et al., 2002).

The discrepancies in the level and intensity of congregational social service involvement found in various studies have typically been attributed to methodological and sampling differences between studies (Cnaan et al., 2002; Wuthnow, 2004). For example, it has been suggested that Cnaan's study favors large urban congregations which have consistently been found to support larger numbers of social service programs (Chaves, 2004; Dudley and Roozen, 2001), while Chaves' study may be more representative of small congregations than other congregational studies. In addition, the

method of interviewing that Cnaan and his researchers used may have increased the likelihood of congregational respondents actually remembering and reporting some social service activities (Cnaan et al., 2002).

Despite discrepancies in the number of social services engaged in by the average congregation, there is agreement that congregations contribute to social service programs in local communities (Ammerman, 2005; Cnaan et al., 2002; Dudley and Roozen, 2001; Wineburg, 2001; Wuthnow, 2004). There is also growing evidence that when congregations become involved in social services they are likely to do so in partnership with other local organizations (Ammerman, 2005; Dudley and Roozen, 2001; Wineburg, 2001; Wuthnow, 2004). Rarely do congregations establish their own social service programs. Instead, congregational support of social services increasingly involves the contribution of congregational resources to other organizations that specialize in the provision of social services (Chaves 2004). Nancy Ammerman (2005) found that the average American congregation supports about five service organizations with money, space, or volunteers. In addition, she found that 65 percent of congregations had at least one connection to a local human service organization (Ammerman, 2005).

While interest in the relationships between service agencies and congregations has increased, few studies have examined them in detail. The studies that have explored these relationships have tended to focus on the resources that congregations provide to social service agencies (Ammerman, 2005; Cnaan et al., 2002; Wineburg, 2001). Congregations have been shown to provide an array of material, human, and social resources to local organizations. These contributions include financial resources (Ammerman, 2005; Cnaan et al., 2002), use of congregational facilities (Cnaan et al.,

2002; Wineburg, 2001), and volunteer labor (Chaves, 2004; Wuthnow, 2004). In addition, scholars have begun to recognize the unique social capital and faith-based resources that religious congregations have to offer communities (Ammerman, 1997; Bartkowski and Regis, 2003; Cnaan et al., 2002; Putnam, 2000; Stark and Johnson, 2005).

### *Faith-Based Social Capital*

The concept of social capital has been defined various ways in the sociological literature (Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1999; Putnam, 2000). This research, however, draws on Putnam's (2000) conception of the term, referring to the existence of strong social networks, norms of reciprocity, and high levels of interpersonal trust in communities and organizations. The presence of social capital has been shown to increase the likelihood of social interaction and collective action among community members, as it increases the ease with which these social phenomena take place (Putnam, 2000). In fact, Putnam (2000) states that social capital, "greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly" (p. 288). Research at the community level supports this idea, revealing that the mere presence of religious congregations may actually contribute to the well-being of communities (Lee and Bartkowski, 2004; Mencken et al., 2006; Tolbert et al., 1998). Studies such as these suggest that religious congregations are nodes of social capital embedded within local communities. In addition, some forms of social capital have been shown to bridge social cleavages and may increase the likelihood of congregations partnering with social service organizations (Wuthnow, 1999).

Scholars in the sociology of religion have recently suggested that unique faith-based forms of social capital may also exist in congregations (Ammerman, 1997;

Bartkowski and Regis, 2003). The term refers to the social networks, shared religious norms, and interpersonal trust that are generated within religious congregations (Bartkowski and Regis, 2003). This faith-based social capital may be thought of as a resource that makes it easier for congregation members to become involved in the life of their congregations and communities. It increases the flow of information between members and increases the likelihood that members will become aware of opportunities to serve in their communities. In addition, the power of shared religious and moral values is likely to motivate and empower congregational involvement in social services.

Research at the individual level supports the connection between congregational involvement and some types of altruistic and charitable activity (Hodgkinson et al. 1995; Wuthnow, 1999). Congregational involvement increases the likelihood of participation in civic activities (Lenski, 1961; Park and Smith, 2000; Greeley, 1997; Schwadel, 2005; Smidt, 1999; Wuthnow, 1999), and highly religious individuals are often more likely to donate both their time and their money to charitable causes or organizations (Hoge and Yang, 1994; Hodgkinson et al., 1995; Park and Smith, 2000; Regnerus et al., 1998). Being highly integrated into the life of a local religious community increases the likelihood that someone will volunteer or contribute to a local service organization.

The religious character of congregations may be another faith-based social resource that congregations have to offer their communities. As religious organizations, congregations are often viewed as the most credible and trustworthy institutions in a society (Ammerman, 1997; Wuthnow, 2004). It has been shown that people are generally more trusting of congregations than they are of other organizations (Wuthnow, 2004). In fact, Nancy Ammerman (1997) suggests that community members often expect

congregations to be the one institution in society that will uphold and protect the moral order (p. 367). As a result, social service agencies partnering with local congregations may also benefit from their community reputation.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this research is to examine the types of relationships that exist between social service agencies and local congregations as well as the effect that these relationships have on service agencies themselves. Several scholars have recently begun to explore how faith-involvement affects the character of social service agencies (Ebaugh et al., 2003; Sider and Unruh, 2001; Sherman, 2003; Unruh, 2004; Johnson et al., 2004). However, many of these studies have led to the creation of organizational typologies that attempt to explain which types of agencies are most influenced by faith involvement (Jeavons, 1998; Search for Common Ground, 2002; Sider and Unruh, 2004; Smith and Sosin, 2001).

These organizational studies have helped scholars to gain a broader understanding of the types of service organizations that exist and how their differences affect the likelihood that their programs will be influenced by religious faith. These studies have also contributed to our understanding of the ways that faith becomes infused into the work of different service organizations. However, focusing solely on organizational typologies may draw attention away from two other important aspects of agency – congregation relationships; that they are universal and that they are dynamic. These relationships exist among all types of service agencies, and they are likely to change over time. Faith-based agencies are not the only agencies that utilize the resources of local congregations. Congregations have been shown to support faith-based, secular, and

governmental service agencies (Ammerman, 2005, p. 188). For this reason, the focus of this study will be on examining the types of relationships that exist between congregations and service agencies in more detail.

Despite the ubiquitous nature of congregational service involvement and the popular notion that they possess valuable social capital, little is actually known about the nature of the relationships that congregations have with local social service agencies. Research has not often enough examined either the character or the extent of these relationships. The focus of this paper, therefore, is on answering the following research questions:

- 1. What are the types of relationships that develop between social service agencies and local congregations?*
- 2. How important are the human, material, and social capital contributions of religious congregations to social service providers?*
- 3. How do social service agencies negotiate secular and religious boundaries in their relationships with congregations?*

## CHAPTER TWO

### Data and Methodology

During the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006 I surveyed and interviewed the executive directors of thirty-one social service agencies in one mid-sized Texas city in order to gain information about the relationships that existed between their organizations and local religious congregations. My sample was purposive, selected to include a variety of agencies that served low-income and needy clients. To create my sample I initially created a master list of service agencies, compiling data from several local social service directories. From this comprehensive list I selected thirty agencies for the study. In selecting specific agencies I tried to be as representative of the types of agencies in the local social service sector as possible. I then augmented this list using snowball sampling techniques (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). I relied on research participants to inform me of other organizations in the community that were providing similar services to low-income clients. This allowed me to be more inclusive of smaller, more recently established agencies that were not listed in the existing service directories, and yielded four more service agencies.

I included faith-based agencies, private non-sectarian agencies, and governmental agencies in my sample. I also selected agencies from the major geographic and socioeconomic areas of the city. The one factor that all participating agencies had in common was that they provided some type of social service directly to low-income clients. Whenever possible I included faith-based and private non-sectarian service

agencies that provided similar services in my sample. Table 1 below provides descriptive information about the agencies that participated in this study.

Table 1

*Descriptive Information on Local Service Agencies*

Agency Type	Primary Service Area	Years Established	No. Employees	Annual Budget
Private	Community Dev.	8	1	\$0 – 25K
Private	Housing	5	2	\$25K – 50K
Faith-based	Healthcare	4	2	\$25K – 50K
Faith-based	Families & Children	4	2	\$50K – 100K
Faith-based	Housing	5	4	\$100K – 200K
Faith-based	Housing	3	2	\$100K – 200K
Private	Youth	12	3	\$100K – 200K
Faith-based	Job Training	3	2	\$100K – 200K
Private	Shelter	12	11	\$200K – 500K
Private	Families & Children	---	12	\$200K – 500K
Private	Families & Children	44	6	\$200K – 500K
Faith-based	Families & Children	3	10	\$200K – 500K
Private	Housing	13	7	\$500K – 1 million
Faith-based	Housing	20	13	\$500K – 1 million
Private	Food	39	73	\$500K – 1 million
Private	Food	39	26	\$500K – 1 million
Faith-based	Emergency Asst.	20	10	\$500K – 1 million
Faith-based	Emergency Asst.	126	70	\$500K – 1 million
Private	Healthcare	67	25	\$500K – 1 million
Faith-based	Healthcare	22	13	\$500K – 1 million
Private	Abuse/Violence	26	27	\$1 – 3 million
Private	Abuse/Violence	30	22	\$1 – 3 million
Faith-based	Emergency Asst.	14	28	\$1 – 3 million
Faith-based	Aging/Elderly	17	33	\$1 – 3 million
Government	Housing	---	77	\$1 – 3 million
Private	Emergency Asst.	40	325	\$3 million or above
Government	Families & Children	---	---	\$3 million or above
Faith-based	Families & Children	116	350	\$3 million or above
Private	Substance Abuse	37	75	\$3 million or above
Private	Youth	17	100	\$3 million or above
Private	Substance Abuse	4	2	---



In order to increase the likelihood of agency participation, I initially contacted the executive director of each service agency to ask them to be a part of the study. Once each director agreed to participate in the study they were mailed a survey, and an in-depth interview was scheduled. Out of thirty-four agencies that were initially contacted, thirty-one agency directors agreed to participate in the study. Three directors declined to participate for various reasons, and one director completed only the in-depth interview. My total sample size for the study was thirty-one.

The written survey requested detailed information about the types of congregational resources that each agency utilized, how long those resources had been utilized, and what local congregations provided those resources. Background information was also collected about each service agency and the congregations that it worked with. Many of the items included on the survey were drawn from a survey instrument previously developed by researchers studying congregational social service involvement in Greensboro, North Carolina (Wineburg, 2001). In-depth interviews were structured and lasted from thirty minutes to an hour. Interview participants were asked a series of predetermined questions, developed by the researcher, dealing with their agency's relationships with religious congregations, how those relationships had been established, and how they impacted the work of the agency. I conducted and transcribed each interview.

The focus of this exploratory study has been on examining more closely the relationships that exist between social service agencies and local religious congregations. Because this is an understudied area, and because these relationships are difficult to identify and measure empirically, my findings are based primarily on the analysis of

qualitative data. I relied on the stories and experiences that agency directors shared to address the primary research questions driving this study. I allowed my findings to emerge from themes that I identified in the interview transcripts.

Using a grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis (Straus and Corbin, 1998) I coded all interviews looking for emergent themes related to how agency directors understood the relationships that their agencies had with religious congregations. I was particularly interested in the phrases that agency directors used to describe their relationships with congregations, how intentional these relationships were, and what organizational strategies they had developed for negotiating secular and religious boundaries with religious congregations. The findings of this study are not generalizable to the larger universe of social service agencies in the U.S. or even Texas. However, the aim of this study was not to draw conclusions about how all service agencies in all contexts relate to religious congregations, but to reveal with more clarity the complex and dynamic nature of the relationships that may exist between service agencies and congregations in local communities.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Agency – Congregation Relationships

Past research has explored the different types of social service agencies that exist and how levels of faith involvement vary among them (Ebaugh, 2003; Jeavons, 1998; Search for Common Ground, 2002; Sider and Unruh, 2004; Smith and Sosin, 2001). In contrast, this research focuses on identifying and examining the types of relationships that develop between service agencies and religious congregations. My findings suggest that all types of agencies develop these relationships. For this reason I suggest that it will be valuable for researchers to understand more about the various ways that these organizations relate to one another.

The interviews that I conducted with service agency directors in Waco, Texas revealed widespread congregational involvement. Nearly every agency director that I spoke with reported that their agency had developed at least one relationship with a local congregation, and most reported multiple relationships. Based on agency directors' accounts, I suggest that these relationships typically fall into four basic categories or types. While relationship categories tended to be mutually exclusive, agencies' style of relating to congregations did not. Agencies did not engage in one single type of relationship with every partnering congregation. Service agencies typically reported having relationships with several congregations at the same time, often of different types. Each relationship type required different relational strategies and different levels of involvement. An agency might be involved in a very elaborate partnership with one local

congregation and have a very loose relationship with another congregation at the same time. Rather than conceptualizing these relationship categories as falling along a particular continuum from less involved to more involved, it will be helpful to view each relationship type as a distinct way of relating to local congregations. It should be noted, however, that relationships are likely to change over time and that there are likely relationships that fall outside of these four categories.

Using a classification scheme similar to those used by other scholars in recent years (Search for Common Ground, 2002; Unruh, 2004), I have organized agency – congregation relationships into four distinct categories. Four questions helped me to conceptualize the differences between categories of relationship: How independent are the organizations in the relationships (and could they continue to provide services without each other)? Do organizational boundaries remain distinct in the relationship? How frequent is the amount of interaction that occurs between agency and congregational representatives? Which organization was responsible for initiating the relationship? Table 2 below illustrates how these questions were used to conceptualize relationship categories.

Given my sample of thirty-one local agencies, I do not expect that these relationship types are exhaustive. Nevertheless, it will be beneficial for researchers to begin to pay closer attention to the various characteristics of the relationships that develop between congregations and service agencies in the provision of services. These relationships may reveal more about the complex ways that congregations support and help sustain local systems of service provision.

Table 2

*Agency-Congregation Relationship Categories*

Categories	Dependence?	Boundaries?	Interaction?	Initiated By?
Wedded	Dependent	Indistinct	High	Either
Partnership	Interdependent	Distinct	High	Either
Adoptive	Independent	Distinct	Low	Congregation
Functional	Independent	Distinct	Low	Agency

*Wedded Relationships*

The first category is *wedded relationships*. A social service agency is engaged in a wedded relationship with a congregation when it is dependent or nearly dependent upon that congregation in order to provide services to its clients. Four (13 percent) of the agencies in my study were in wedded relationships with local congregations. For these agencies, congregational involvement was absolutely necessary for service provision. These highly interactive relationships actually helped to sustain the service agencies that engaged in them. Without the aid of local congregations the services provided by these agencies would have been significantly altered or diminished. The director of a faith-based agency that had been established four years earlier as the result of a congregational initiative told me that without the relationship his agency had with that congregation, it would have been unable to provide any services to local families and children. This comment illustrates the dependency that was characteristic of wedded relationships.

In these relationships, dependency was typically accompanied by a close identification with the congregation or religious group that the agency was dependent

upon. This identification, however, often made it difficult to determine where the service agency ended and the congregation began. For example, in one agency that I studied, programs were staffed entirely by volunteers from one particular congregation. In another agency the annual budget was made up predominantly from the financial contributions of a particular congregation. In these close relationships, the organizational boundaries between agencies and the congregations that they related to became indistinct. Consequently, the agencies in wedded relationships often appeared to be part of a local congregation, and some actually considered themselves connected to a particular congregation. In addition, directors had difficulty explaining the boundaries that existed between their agency and those congregations. One representative of an agency that provided emergency assistance to low-income and homeless clients tried to explain the wedded relationship her agency had with a local congregation by telling me, “We are a church. However, our offices are completely separate from our church building. But, I worship at the church, and I am the director of social services. So, I tie them in very closely.” Another director of an agency in a wedded relationship with local congregations explained that his agency actually viewed itself as an extension of the congregations that it related to in this way:

We do consider ourselves as an extension of the local church. So I mean our faith connection is a manifestation of being a local extension of the local church and the local church has a mandate to take care of our neighbor and to take care of orphans. So at some level we are a manifestation of that.

Responses like these reveal the overlapping or indistinct boundaries that exist between agencies and congregations in these wedded relationships. The indistinct boundaries in wedded relationships facilitated high levels of interaction and communication between agency and congregational representatives.

Agencies in wedded relationships often had other types of relationships with congregations as well. Their wedded relationship, however, was often the primary relationship that they were involved in. While agencies might cooperate with other congregations to provide certain services, their most important relationship was usually with the congregation they were wedded to. Not surprisingly, all of the agencies that engaged in wedded relationships with religious congregations were faith-based service agencies. This makes sense given their level of dependence upon, and close interaction with, religious congregations. Secular service agencies are unlikely to engage in these types of relationships.

### *Partnerships*

I have labeled the second category of relationship *partnerships*. A social service agency becomes engaged in a partnership with a local congregation when it agrees to work cooperatively with that congregation to provide some community service. In partnerships both organizations invest resources in, and share ownership of, the service programs being offered. The cooperative nature of these relationships increases the level of interaction among agency and congregational representatives. However, organizational boundaries remain much clearer than the boundaries in wedded relationships. In addition, partnerships tend to be negotiated through some type of formal agreement. Fifteen (48 percent) of the service agencies that I studied were engaged in partnerships with local congregations. In fact, these partnerships were one of the most common ways that the service agencies in my sample related to religious congregations.

In these relationships, service agencies and congregations agreed to work together to accomplish some service goal that both organizations had an interest in, such as

establishing a community feeding program, providing youth services to at-risk neighborhood children, or making affordable housing available to low-income residents. The services provided through partnerships benefited both service agencies and the congregations they partnered with by helping both to accomplish certain aspects of their organizational missions.

A unique element of these partnerships was the interdependence that they fostered between organizations. Because organizations shared resources and responsibility in their efforts to provide a particular service, each relied on the other for certain things. Without the partnership relationship, the services provided by the service agency would have continued, but would have been significantly altered. This is different from the dependence experienced in wedded relationships, where service provision was not possible without congregational assistance.

One faith-based service agency reported partnering with eight local congregations to provide healthcare counseling to uninsured clients. The service agency possessed a professional staff and the technology necessary to help a limited number of clients on their own. However, by forming partnerships with local congregations the agency increased its ability to reach needy clients. The agency gained access to the volunteer labor and physical facilities of partnering congregations, as well as the communication networks of those congregations, allowing it to increase its services and expand its client base. Without these partnerships the agency would have likely continued providing services to uninsured clients. However, the partnerships allowed the agency to share and coordinate resources in a way that made their services both more efficient and more effective.



In developing partnerships with local congregations this agency also sought to establish programs that benefited both organizations. The director explained his agency's strategy this way:

So what we want to do is find out what their [congregations'] interest is or what the need is in their church to see if there is a match, to see if what we are offering does supplement, augment, or get them further on down the road towards meeting their mission goals. That's always a question, that's always a conversation that takes place when we go out and visit with a church. We ask them what their mission goals are.

This is illustrative of the fact that these partnerships tend to be mutually beneficial to the organizations involved. In the example above, the service agency sought to increase the number of clients that they could help by enlisting the help of congregations whose mission goals were similar. Other service agency directors made similar comments.

The formality of these partnerships varied from agency to agency. Some service agencies required a written agreement in order to establish a partnership, while others reported that their partnerships were based on verbal agreements. Approximately half of the agencies engaged in partnerships with congregations reported having some form of document or contract that spelled out each organization's contributions and responsibilities in the relationship. Before establishing a program or providing a service in cooperation with a congregation these service agencies would ask congregational representatives to sign this document. It gave partnering organizations a clearer understanding of their various roles in the relationship. Going through the process of formalizing these partnerships also helped some of the service agencies that I studied to increase their level of credibility with local congregations. One director of a fairly young faith-based agency that used formal agreements with congregations told me that she felt

like congregations were more willing to cooperate with her agency when there was a written agreement in place.

Different agencies had different names for these formal agreements, reflecting their various approaches to faith involvement. For example, some agencies, typically those that considered themselves faith-based, often drew on religious language of promise and described their agreements as covenants. Other agencies simply referred to their agreements with congregations as contracts or memorandums of understanding much like an agreement with any other type of organization. Regardless of their names, formal agreements were an important element of the partnerships that these agencies established with local congregations. They allowed each partner to maintain their distinct organizational boundaries and identity within the relationship. The director of one faith-based agency that partnered with several congregations to run a variety of social service programs described the agreement this way:

With the churches we call them covenant agreements, and basically it's a contractual relationship.... It outlines roles, responsibilities, at some level expectations. It outlines liability issues. It outlines insurance issues, outlines some employment issues, just the basics in terms of what would need to be understood particularly when there is financial exchange that's occurring.

Partnerships were reported by faith-based and private service agencies alike; although there was a tendency for these relationships to be more common among the faith-based service agencies in the study. Nevertheless, six private agencies reported engaging in partnerships with local congregations. Most often when private agencies partnered with a local congregation, it was to provide one particular service or program. In contrast to the limited nature of the partnerships between private organizations and congregations, the partnerships between faith-based agencies and congregations tended to

be more comprehensive. Faith-based agencies might partner with congregations to provide several service programs. Faith-based agencies also tended to more often report having multiple partnerships whereas secular agencies tended to have one or two at most. This could be because faith-based agencies often had an organizational strategy in place for developing and maintaining partnerships with congregations. The director of one faith-based agency that partnered with congregations to increase local homeownership in the community told me that her agency was intentional about establishing partnerships:

As a matter of fact, when we do our goals and objectives I would say that 40 percent of them ... relate to trying to develop more local church initiatives and more local relationships with churches and that kind of thing.

Another director of a faith-based agency that provides emergency assistance to low-income and homeless clients described his agency's long-term efforts to engage congregations in partnerships:

We have to bring churches along with us, and so we became a whole lot more intentional about [not] just asking them to give us money for our programs, but to really come be a part of it with us. So, for the last ten or so years we've been working hard to develop those relationships with churches, and I think probably stand pretty strong in that.

Each partnership that formed between service agencies and local congregations was unique. However, one private agency reported a particularly unique partnership with several local congregations. The director reported entering into a fee for service relationship with congregations in order to develop youth mentoring services. In these partnerships the service agency agreed to pay partnering congregations a certain amount each year for making successful matches between adult mentors, drawn from their membership, and at-risk youth in the community. The congregations agreed to recruit, train, and oversee the volunteer mentors. Partnerships like this one represent a very

unique opportunity that service agencies had to join with religious congregations in order to improve their services.

### *Adoptive Relationships*

The third category is *adoptive relationships*. An adoptive relationship exists between a service agency and a congregation when the agency receives, or is given access to, the resources and support of a local congregation without having to solicit them. In these relationships, congregations proactively seek to aid the work of certain service agencies in their community out of their sense of religious mission or commitment to the community. Adoptive relationships were fairly common among the agencies I studied. Fifteen (48 percent) of the directors that I interviewed indicated relating to a local congregation this way. The directors generally spoke of being adopted or being, “taken on as a project,” by a local congregation. The exact nature of these relationships varied, however, from situation to situation. Some congregations provided agencies with needed resources like food and clothing for their clients, while others contributed resources such as volunteer labor or program leadership. A variety of congregational resources flowed to local service agencies through these types of relationships. However, the flow of resources in these relationships generally moved in one direction, from congregation to service agency.

The adoptive relationships discussed were typically characterized by informality and low levels of agency investment. These relationships allowed both organizations to maintain distinct organizational boundaries and required minimal organizational interaction. Several directors reported that informal relationships had formed rather serendipitously when someone from a local congregation approached them to offer

support. A few agencies reported that congregations approached them with some particular contribution already in mind, while most reported that congregations had simply asked the agency what they could do to help. The director of a substance abuse treatment center even humorously related how several local congregations had offered volunteer assistance that the agency really did not need at the time, but that they had accepted simply because it was offered. The director of a crisis pregnancy center told a similar story about congregations contributing more diapers and baby supplies than the agency needed. The agency directors that I spoke with indicated that they rarely turned down these forms of support when they were offered.

One of the most distinct characteristics of these adoptive relationships was that they were always initiated by congregations. This suggests that some local congregations sought out service agencies to support and that they proactively identified ways to serve them. Agency directors indicated that they had done little to engage these congregations initially and continued to do little to maintain the relationships. In fact, the director of a women's shelter who reported receiving occasional support from three local congregations had this to say about maintaining those relationships:

Every once in a while they'll call us. Like right now one of the mission ladies keeps asking me about needs, and they send me a hundred dollars to buy pots and pans, and just little things like that. So they're there, and I don't solicit them. They keep coming up saying hello what do you need?

In addition to what these sorts of comments revealed about the sensitivity of congregations to community needs, they also revealed that these informal relationships were on-going. Religious congregations, in these relationships, did more than provide one-time services. They sought to maintain a supportive relationship with local agencies, informal as the relationships were. Similar to the comment above, the director of a

governmental agency that assists families and children had this to say about the congregations that they related to:

Their mission program brings care packages about every six months.... They just called and said we would really like to do something, tell me some of your needs. I told them several things and that's the one they chose.

While adoptive relationships were reported by all types of service agencies, there were a few patterns that I noted. This phenomenon seemed to occur more commonly among the private and governmental agencies than the faith-based agencies in the study. It is not clear why this was the case, but it could be due to certain characteristics of faith-based agencies. The faith-based agencies in the study tended to be more proactive in pursuing relationships with congregations while secular private and governmental agencies tended to be less so, instead allowing congregations to approach them or waiting until a particular need arose before seeking congregational support. However, there is no evidence in the data to suggest that local congregations aimed their support unevenly at the private or government agencies.

For service agencies, being adopted in this way by a local congregation was a way of securing needed resources at virtually no cost to the agency. The agency directors in these relationships reported that the congregations typically expected nothing in return for their support. In fact, when asked, agency directors often had a difficult time conjecturing what congregations might receive from these relationships and why they sought to establish such relationships in the first place. Several directors told me explicitly they did not know how these relationships benefited congregations and could not speculate on it. Consistent with findings from another recent study of congregational social service involvement (Cnaan et al., 2002), a few agency directors suggested that

these relationships provided congregations an opportunity to make a difference in their community and allowed them to establish relationships with agency clients that they otherwise would not have had access to. The director of a shelter for victims of domestic abuse that receives support from a number of congregations told me, “I think all of them underlying give because they want to give back, and they do it because they see the need in the community.” Similarly, the director of another local agency that provides meals to elderly and disabled clients and that relies very heavily on the support of local congregation for volunteers and financial support said, “They [congregations] get more from the clients. I mean it’s really just a vehicle for ministry, a method, because I think what they really gain from it is that relationship with clients.”

A possible motivation for these relationships not mentioned by agency directors is that outreach through adoptive relationships with service agencies may aid congregations in establishing their image within the community as an organization that cares about others in need. In a historical study of American religious groups, Finke and Stark (2001) found that the religious groups most adept at marketing themselves to prospective members were also the most likely to thrive and remain successful over time. Altruism and community service may be two effective techniques that some congregations use to market themselves in the context of a community (Cnaan et al., 2002, p.268). Research has shown that community service activities are often expected from religious congregations in contemporary U.S. society (Ammerman, 2005). Ammerman suggests that they are part of what makes up a congregation’s, “institutional template” (p. 156). In other words, part of what makes a religious organization in the U.S. a congregation is its involvement in certain altruistic activities that benefit the community. It may be that

these adoptive sorts of relationships actually benefit congregations by solidifying their identity within the community as a caring institution. Nevertheless, the agencies that were adopted by these congregations tended to view the support as purely altruistic in nature.

### *Functional Relationships*

I have labeled the fourth category *functional relationships*. A functional relationship is a one-way relationship that a service agency establishes with a congregation in order to access some specific congregational resource. While adoptive relationships are initiated by congregations, functional relationships are initiated by service agencies. These relationships tend to be very informal and benefit the service agency exclusively. Functional relationships were the single most common type of relationship reported by service agencies in the study. Seventeen (55 percent) of the agencies I studied reported having this type of relationship with congregations. When these agencies needed volunteers for a particular program or needed to locate funds to assist a client in need, they turned to local congregations to meet those needs. I have labeled this type of relationship functional because interactions between the two organizations typically revolved around the transfer of some needed resource, and existed primarily to serve the functional and programmatic needs of the service agency involved.

These relationships were typically characterized by informal social connections, minimal organizational interaction, and generally developed as a result of agency initiation. The congregations that agencies reported utilizing were not necessarily seeking to be utilized, but were willing to provide resources when asked by agencies, including financial support that some agency directors indicated came from



congregations' benevolence or mission budgets. These relationships were formed most commonly when someone from a service agency, typically a director or front-line service worker, sought out needed resources from a local congregation that they knew possessed those resources. One director of a faith-based agency that provided emergency assistance and shelter to homeless clients described the nature of functional relationships very succinctly when she said, "I feel that it's more us asking them [congregations] than them truly seeking to say hey we're available for this service." The director of a private agency that provides counseling and social services to school children and their families reported that his agency relies on functional relationships with congregations to meet many of their clients' needs:

Our folks then become experts at resources and knowing [where resources are]. You know, their job is to connect clients with resources in the community, and so it's not unusual for them to know that there's a church in the neighborhood ... that has a food closet or will occasionally help out with the electric bill.

Sometimes agencies solicited resources from congregations on their own behalf, but most often agencies developed functional relationships with congregations in order to locate emergency assistance for their clients. It was common for agency directors to report that they had a history of relying on the same few congregations whenever they had clients with particular needs. Over time, these agencies had established a de facto functional relationship with several local congregations that they knew would meet the needs of their clients. One agency director put it this way:

These are the ones that we have a working relationship with and apparently they have in their budget helping our people, because he [agency worker] goes several times a month to different places [referring to congregations]. Every month there's someone who needs rental assistance, every month.... He has these working relationships with these churches.

Many times these functional relationships developed out of an agency representative's own personal or congregational social networks. Agency directors reported going to their own congregation or to the congregation of someone else on staff to request assistance. Many of these functional relationships were initially forged as a result of the congregation knowing and supporting some particular staff member in the agency itself. This finding is consistent with recent scholarship that has shown how the social capital of service agencies and service workers may benefit their clients (Livermore and Neustrom, 2003; Lockhart, 2005). Interview responses suggest that functional relationships are one important way that the individual faith-based social capital of staff members benefits the service agencies that they work for. The director of a private nonprofit agency that placed social workers in school settings told me the story of how his own congregation became involved in the work of his organization:

I actually went to my own church, and we kind of made a wish list that, you know, that we put up and asked folks to take stuff... and so the folks from the congregation gave different kinds of school supplies and art supplies and stuff just to kind of have a start, kind of a start up point for the after school program. That's the first time we'd ever done really anything like that.

Almost every agency director that I spoke with expressed the sentiment that local congregations are rich in resources from which their agencies could benefit. When agency staff members encountered community members in need and did not know where else to turn to seek help they often turned to the functional relationships they had established with local congregations for assistance. Many reported that over time their employees had identified what local congregations were willing to provide them with money, volunteers, or space and they often returned to those same congregations when a need arose. Congregations were often viewed by agencies as available deposits of

resources that they could tap into when needed. One director of a private federally funded agency that provided emergency assistance to low-income clients told the following story:

About four or five years ago there was a family in an automobile accident. The mother died and the father came to us saying I don't have money to bury her. And, we don't have any money that we can use for a funeral.... Between us and neighborhood churches we were able to help that man get one of his family members buried. It really does take a village to raise a child or to help a family.

This comment illustrates another important pattern that emerged from the interviews with agency directors. Service agencies tended to establish these sorts of functional relationships with congregations that were located near them or their clients. This suggests that agencies and congregations may often interact to meet identified needs within a particular geographic community. Regardless of whether the agency was faith-based, private non-sectarian, or governmental, they often viewed congregations as a natural place to turn when seeking help for community members in need.

#### *Agencies Having No Relationships*

Eight (26 percent) of the service agencies that participated in this study initially reported having no relationships with local congregations when they were contacted by telephone. However, after interviewing agency directors, I found that it was actually very rare for an agency to have no relationships with local congregations. Only three (10 percent) of the agencies in the study actually had no relationships with local congregations. Interview responses suggested to me that it might be more accurate to characterize some agencies' relationships with congregations as limited or tenuous, and that these could generally be placed in the category of functional relationships since they often involved only the transfer of some particular resource.

During interviews with directors, as we talked about the programs and services that their agencies provided, most directors recalled various ways that congregations had been involved with their agency that had not occurred to them at first. I found that even those agencies that seemed most adamant about maintaining their separation from local congregations, due to funding restrictions or agency policy, had typically utilized the resources of a congregation at one point in time, even if only peripherally. Drawing from interview responses of these agency directors I surmise that sometimes congregational involvement may be perceived as minimal or nonexistent when viewed in light of the entire array of services engaged in by service agencies. This may be particularly the case when congregational involvement is limited to one program within an agency. The director of a private service agency that initially reported having no relationships with local congregations later told me that congregations were involved, but with only one of his agency's programs:

It's very significant for that particular program... but in terms of size I mean it's on the smaller end of our programs, and so outside of that there's just not a whole lot of consistent connection with churches, certainly not agency wide.

Of the three agency directors whose agencies had no relationships with local congregations, two told me that they had not made any efforts to involve congregations because it had never occurred to them to do so. The other director told me that the level of congregational support for his agency was, "zilch." However, he told me that it wasn't for lack of trying. The director reported that the agency had sought support from local congregations by various means for several years and that it had been disappointed in each and every attempt. He told me, "Oh yeah, we sent flyers to everybody, talked with many of the ministers, but the interest is not there. Once they found that it wouldn't be

any money in their pockets that was the end.” This experience seems to be at odds with the more congenial relationship that most agency directors reported having had with local congregations.

Four (13 percent) of the agencies in the study reported having some antagonistic relationships with local congregations. Three of these, however, also reported that they had some very positive relationships with a few local congregations. The directors of these three agencies reported that their organizations had taken unpopular stands on certain moral and political issues that congregations in the community were sensitive about. Issues included things such as abortion, sex education in public schools, and homosexuality. The directors reported that highly publicized debates over these moral and political issues had made it more difficult for their agencies to establish relationships with some local congregations. Often the relationships that they did have with local congregations tended to be with those congregations that publicly supported similar social issues. Directors in these agencies reported that these congregational relationships were important for their agencies’ community identity. Table 3 below summarizes the types of relationships that were reported by the faith-based, private, and governmental service agencies in this study.

Findings indicate that involvement of religious congregations in the provision of social services is widespread in Waco, Texas. Agencies across the spectrum, from faith-based to governmental service agencies, built relationships with congregations that aided them in providing needed services to community members. What varied was the form of relationship that was built between congregations and social service agencies. Other than those relationships I have characterized as wedded relationships, no particular category of

relationship was peculiar to any particular type of agency. However, there were patterns that emerged that seem to suggest that faith-based agencies tended to be more comfortable engaging congregations in interactive and formalized ways, while private and governmental agencies tended to be more likely to engage congregations at arms length.

Table 3

*Relationship Types Reported by Local Service Agencies*

Agency Type	Relationships				
	Wedded	Partnership	Adoptive	Functional	None
Faith-Based <sup>a</sup>	4	9	5	4	0
Private Non-Profit <sup>b</sup>	0	6	8	11	3
Governmental <sup>c</sup>	0	0	2	2	0

*Note.* Because service agencies were allowed to report multiple types of congregational relationships, the sum of each row may be greater than the number of agencies in each category. <sup>a</sup> n = 13. <sup>b</sup> n = 16. <sup>c</sup> n = 2.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Use of Congregational Resources

Findings from this study also suggest that agencies benefit significantly from the access to congregational resources that agency – congregation relationships provide. As the director of one agency that matched adult mentors with at-risk youth put it, “Religious congregations are resource rich institutions!” She shared with me that even though her agency did not recruit from congregations they relied heavily on congregational volunteers to serve as mentors. The experiences that agency directors shared with me confirm previous researchers’ findings that congregations contribute a variety of material, human, and social resources to local community service agencies (Ammerman, 1997; Bartkowski and Regis, 2003; Cnaan et al., 2002; Wineburg, 2001). In addition, my findings suggest that service agencies are keenly aware of these contributions and that they often work hard to secure them. It is not exaggeration to say that the service sector in Waco, Texas would be adversely affected if congregations no longer contributed such resources.

#### *Financial Resources*

One of the most common ways that congregations supported the work of service agencies in this study was by making financial contributions directly to them. Twenty-two (71 percent) of the service agencies that I observed reported receiving some type of funding from religious congregations. In addition, those agencies that received financial support tended to receive support from multiple congregations. On average, service

agencies in the study reported receiving contributions from eleven congregations each. This suggests that congregational financial contributions to social service agencies were fairly widespread.

In many cases, however, the financial contributions that congregations made tended not to be very large. Funding received from congregations' contributions generally made up a very small portion of each agency's entire annual budget, averaging approximately four percent. Despite its small size, agency directors emphasized the significance of this funding for their agencies. Directors were aware of the fact that congregations could choose to use their money in many other ways and that there were other local agencies with significant needs. The director of a women's shelter that received funding from ten local congregations reinforced to me just how appreciative she was of the financial support her agency received:

They're very generous. Considering there's what, 800 nonprofits in McLennan County alone? I think they're very generous.... Would we like more? Of course we would. I'm not going to tell you no. Of course we would like more.... The congregations that give to us on a regular basis are very faithful, you know? Do they give millions of dollars? No. There are very few churches here that could afford to give millions or even hundreds of dollars. You know, we're appreciative of everything that we get. I don't want to minimize it at all.

These financial contributions usually came to service agencies in one of several ways. Congregations would sometimes include service agencies in their annual budgets as a line item, guaranteeing that those agencies would receive regular contributions from the congregation. Many service directors expressed to me that this was the best situation possible because it typically meant that the congregation planned to provide annual support. At other times congregations provided contributions to agencies on a more sporadic basis throughout the year, and a few agencies reported receiving financial



contributions on an as-needed basis. When these agencies needed funding for a particular program or service they felt that they could request it from local congregations. This finding suggests that different congregations approach charitable giving differently. Some plan their gifts to community agencies well in advance, while other congregations tend to be less structured with their financial gifts and contribute as they have money available.

It was typical for the service agencies I studied to report that their funding from local congregations was made up of both regular contributions and more occasional financial gifts from different congregations throughout the year. The regular gifts from congregations often became a part of the agency's own annual budget. The occasional or sporadic financial gifts from congregations were viewed by directors more as unexpected gifts that they could use for one-time needs. They could not plan on receiving these contributions to help pay bills or salaries, but these contributions often allowed them to do special things for their employees or meet clients' emergency needs. The director of an agency that provided emergency assistance to victims of domestic violence told me that his agency received both types of support. He said, "Well, we're in several budgets. You know, we'll get a certain amount every month from some congregations ... we'll get special offerings sometimes from some congregations, and we've received some annual funds from the Episcopal Diocese." The director of a local food bank that received support from many local congregations explained the variation in financial contributions from congregations this way:

I think we have 20 or more congregations where ... the contribution is basically the same every month. It comes monthly. It's pretty much the same. It doesn't vary, you know. And then we have some that ... they do special things ... so all

of a sudden you'll get a check for \$500 because they did a special thing [offering or fundraiser].

Though nearly every service agency reported receiving financial contributions from congregations at one point in time, directors also emphasized that it had typically been difficult to get their agencies into congregational budgets to begin with. Directors told me that once a congregation began contributing they were likely to continue doing so, but acquiring their support in the first place was far more difficult. The agency director of a women's shelter shared her frustrations related to congregational funding. She told me the humorous story of her initial experience trying to get congregational funding:

I just thought they just don't know [what] we're doing, and I'll just send out a letter to every church in McLennan County. So I composed these beautiful letters, not only to the Christian churches but [also] the Jewish synagogues, and you know I kept waiting for the mailman to come like Santa Claus with these bags of responses about how they were going to volunteer and how they were going to start helping us financially. And out of 300 letters I got 5 responses. So it's been a real struggle.

The director of a faith-based agency that provided emergency assistance and case management to low-income and homeless clients expressed similar difficulties in acquiring financial contributions from congregations initially. While his agency had a hard time getting congregations to support them financially at first, they were eventually able to secure annual support from thirty-five local congregations. Reflecting on the process of acquiring that support, he acknowledged how difficult it was for new service agencies to find congregational funding. He said, "[They] just assume they'll just go get money from churches, and they don't realize churches rarely support non-profits, particularly not new ones, from a budgetary stand-point. Though, there are few."

Responses like this show that the perception among most social service agency directors was that congregational funding is hard to come by.

Despite my findings that indicate the majority of local service agencies received funding, and usually received it from multiple congregations, agency directors perceived that it was difficult to secure. One explanation commonly given for why it was so hard to get initially was that there were more service agencies in the community seeking financial assistance than congregations could realistically support. In fact, agency directors acknowledged that there was a certain amount of non-profit saturation within the community and that any agencies receiving financial support from any local congregations were very fortunate. For this reason, among the agencies in the study, congregational funding was a very important, and highly coveted, resource.

### *Buildings and Space*

Similar to previous studies of congregational facility use (Cnaan et al., 2002; Wineburg, 2001); I found that many of the local service agencies reported using the facilities of local congregations. Among the agencies that I studied sixteen (52 percent) indicated that they currently utilized congregational space. Of the fifteen service agencies that did not currently use the space of local congregations, nine (60 percent) indicated that they had used the space of congregations at some point in the past. This means that twenty-five (81 percent) reported that they had utilized the facilities of local congregations to hold a meeting, house their offices, or have some type of special event at some point in time.

Despite finding that space was a resource that agencies commonly used; I found that there was much variation in the frequency of space use. Of the sixteen agencies that

currently used congregational space ten reported using space less than once per month. One agency reported using congregational space monthly and one reported using it weekly. Two agencies used congregational space several times per week, and two agencies used it daily. This suggests that most agencies used congregational space fairly infrequently, when they needed space for special events throughout the year. These directors reported using the space for events such as agency parties, staff meetings, or educational programs for clients. Nevertheless, agency directors informed me that allowing their agencies to use space was an important way that congregations supported their service work. One director of an agency that serves victims of abuse told me that his agency looked forward to using the facilities of a local congregation for their staff retreat event every year:

You know we've enjoyed a reduced rate on space there for a couple of years and this year [another church] is going to give us space, a little garden-like place, for this event ... to have kind of a day long staff development day and that kind of stuff, so that's a great gift to have that kind of stuff.

The response of another agency director, whose agency provides counseling and social services to at-risk students, revealed just how significant the use of congregational space can be. The large facilities of a local congregation made it possible for his agency's staff to meet together several times throughout the year. Because his agency did not have a facility large enough to accommodate his entire staff, this was a major contribution. He told me that:

We sometimes use church facilities. We have about 100 employees. Only approximately twenty of them or so are officed here, our central office, and the rest of them work out of schools. So, we don't have any kind of facility large enough for all of that group to meet at one time. So, we sometimes have our monthly staff meeting, usually have like our annual Thanksgiving thing and stuff like that, you know will be at churches.

It is also important to note that the ability to access congregational space represented substantial savings for most of the service agencies using space. Of the sixteen agencies that currently used congregational space, all but one reported being allowed to use the space free of charge. This means that most of these agencies were able to utilize space for free that they would otherwise have had to rent. The one service agency that reported paying for the use of congregational space indicated that it paid a reduced rate for office space in a local congregation which it used daily. On average, each of the service agencies that used congregational space reported having used it for approximately seventeen years. Utilizing congregational space had been a practice that benefited the service agencies in this study for a number of years.

#### *Volunteer Resources*

There is an extensive literature exploring the relationship between religious faith and volunteerism, and it has been widely recognized that congregational involvement has a positive impact on the likelihood that individuals will volunteer their time for community organizations (Greeley, 1997; Park and Smith, 2000; Wilson and Janoski, 1995; Wilson and Musick, 1997; Wuthnow, 1991). What is not as well known is the impact that congregational volunteering has on individual service agencies. How do the contributions of congregational volunteers affect the average service agency in a local community? To address this question information about the recruitment and utilization of congregational volunteers was collected from the agencies in this study.

Twenty-one (67 percent) agencies reported that they recruited volunteers directly from local congregations. This suggests that a majority of the service agencies studied recognized congregations as a viable source of volunteer labor for their service programs

and that they had developed some sort of organizational strategy to help them access those volunteers. Agencies often communicated their volunteer needs to local congregations through agency newsletters or by scheduling speaking engagements in congregational Sunday school classes and small groups. Some attended mission or community service events sponsored by local congregations. Those service agencies that recruited congregational volunteers reported receiving volunteers from an average of thirteen congregations each, and congregational volunteers made up approximately 61 percent of the volunteers used by these agencies. In addition, congregational volunteers made up approximately 37 percent of volunteers reported by all service agencies in the study.

These findings suggest that, overall; agencies were much more comfortable requesting volunteer support than they were asking for money from local congregations. What is more, when service agencies asked for volunteer support they tended to receive it. Those agencies that recruited directly from congregations reported receiving a majority of their volunteers in this way. Yet, it must be acknowledged that congregational volunteers made up a minority of all volunteers reported. These findings, however, may not tell the entire story. Several agency directors told me that it was difficult for them to determine whether volunteers with congregational ties were volunteering as representatives of their congregation or as individuals since they did not ask volunteers about their religious affiliation or involvement. For this reason, those volunteers reported by these agencies were not considered congregational volunteers in this study.

Data collected on the financial value of congregational volunteers to agencies may be somewhat less reliable. Only ten service agencies that utilized congregational volunteers were able to calculate a monetary value for volunteer time donated to their agency in the past year. The average value of congregational volunteer labor for those agencies that could calculate it was approximately \$79,166 annually. This suggests that the value of volunteer labor may be significant for the service agencies in this study. Agencies received volunteer labor that could conceivably offset the cost of additional staff members. It is clear that without congregational volunteers the manpower of the social service agencies in this study would have been significantly reduced. Volunteer intensive programs, such as a mentoring program that utilized approximately 150 volunteers annually and an elderly care program that reported using 3000 volunteers annually, obviously benefited most from congregational volunteers.

My findings also suggest that the level of involvement of congregational volunteers varied a great deal and that service agencies often developed volunteer recruitment strategies with that in mind. The directors of service agencies that utilized substantial volunteer labor informed me that they had learned from experience that not all congregational volunteers desired the same level of involvement. As a result, they had created volunteer opportunities at several different levels, enabling them to cater to the volunteers' desired level of involvement. The director of one faith-based agency that reported using approximately 75 congregational volunteers annually explained his agency's strategy of recruiting volunteers this way:

[We] had to build it very light for some people, if it's folding newsletters and being in the office all the way to working in the projects. So, the design had to be pretty complex for the different needs of where people were.

Interviews with agency directors suggest that there are several basic levels of congregational volunteer involvement. First, some service agencies reported using regular long-term volunteers to staff on-going service programs, such as food programs and crisis counseling programs. On-going programs such as these required a higher level of stability and consistency from volunteers than short-term activities or one-time service projects. Agency directors reported that they counted on the help of their long-term volunteers for many of their regular service programs. The director of an agency that runs a community-wide feeding program told me that her agency used a large number of long-term congregational volunteers to cook, package, and deliver meals to community members. She indicated that many of the current volunteers had been assisting her agency for years. She said, “In fact, most of the volunteers are even long-term. I’ve got some volunteers who have been doing it for thirty years. Now they’re in their 80s delivering. It’s amazing to me.”

Agency directors indicated, however, that these long-term volunteers were often hard to find and that short-term or one-time volunteers were much easier to recruit from congregations. This supports the notion, suggested by Robert Wuthnow (1998), that volunteer relationships are becoming increasingly short-term and flexible. For this reason, however, directors reported that their agencies often recruited congregations’ youth groups and Sunday school classes to complete short-term projects. Rather than providing sustained support for agency programs like the long-term volunteers did, these volunteers were often utilized for projects that required a large numbers of volunteer workers for limited periods of time. Directors told me that short-term volunteers were ideal for projects like building or repairing a home or staffing an annual event such as a



fundraiser. The director of one faith-based agency that provides a variety of social services to elderly community members told me how her agency utilized many short-term volunteers from Methodist churches:

The Methodist churches, I don't know if you know this, but the Methodist churches come together in June and do massive home repair projects, massive. It's really amazing. And they will call us and say okay ... what can we do? And maybe they'll paint houses for our seniors, or build wheelchair ramps or whatever. They just come in masse, maybe three or four hundred people that come.

Such comments from agency directors indicate that volunteer labor is a significant contribution that congregations make. Without them much community service work would likely go undone. Whether long-term or short-term, congregational volunteers helped service agencies to accomplish their mission of providing social services to people in need.

### *Faith-Based Social Capital*

The service agencies that I studied also benefited from a number of more intangible resources that congregations possessed. These intangible resources included things such as congregational social networks, religious values, and community credibility. Some scholars have suggested that these types of resources are components of a unique faith-based social capital that congregations possess and that can be utilized by community service agencies (Bartkowski and Regis, 2003). Despite the difficulty of measuring some of these less tangible resources, my interviews with agency directors suggested that they were a significant resource for service agencies. The social networks and religious character of local congregations were particularly significant to the agencies that I studied.

Agency directors reported utilizing congregational networks in one of two ways. First, congregational networks were sometimes viewed by service directors as a potential source of clients and volunteers. Congregational embeddedness in the local community made them particularly useful organizations for community outreach. Their social networks allowed service agencies to disseminate information about services and programs to a large number of prospective clients rather easily. These service agencies, in effect, utilized congregational networks to market their social services to a larger audience of clients and potential volunteers. For example, the director of one agency that provided services to low-income women and their children explained that congregations allowed her agency to place regular ads in their bulletins and newsletters. She reported that her agency had received a number of new clients as a result of this. In addition, the congregational networks often became a source of client referrals for service agencies. Clergy and congregation members would often send people in need to their agencies. The director of a private agency that assists low-income clients in becoming first time homeowners told me:

We want pastors to be aware of our services, particularly in the lower income church congregations or the churches that serve a lot of lower income families, because we want them to help us spread the word. I think from time to time we get referrals from them. I mean that's the whole point of our newsletter is to send them out to our potential partners so that we will get referrals into our programs.

In a similar vein, the director of an agency that provided services to victims of domestic violence told me that local congregations were also a good way to educate members of the community about certain issues. His agency received occasional referrals from congregations, but he reported that his agency also attempted to educate members of the community by reaching out through congregational networks. He often sought an

audience with local congregations and suggested that other service agencies ought to use congregational networks to educate the community about issues such as poverty, homelessness, and sexual abuse.

In addition to the value of the social networks to these agencies, the religious character of local congregations was also an asset to service agencies. It has been suggested that congregations are often seen by community members as protectors of the moral order (Ammerman, 1997), and as such they tend to be highly trusted institutions (Wuthnow, 2004). My findings suggest that agency directors were aware of this and sought to take advantage of it. Directors that I spoke with indicated that their agencies gained community credibility from the relationships they had with local congregations. This was particularly true for smaller, more recently established agencies that were struggling to break into the community social service network. Many of these agencies had not been around long enough to establish their own reputation in the community, and they were often looking for a way to get their names out. Establishing relationships with trusted, well-known congregations was one way that these agencies could do that.

One director of a very small recently established agency reported that she used her connections with certain congregations to appeal for support from others in the community. Her agency had adoptive relationships with two local congregations that offered credibility and increased the agency's visibility among other service agencies and congregations. The director of another private nonprofit that provided healthcare for low-income women explained the value of her agency's relationships to local congregations this way:

I think they're vitally important, in Waco particularly.... The credibility that anything connected to a religious organization in Waco has is just simply taken

for granted... If we can gain the most credible group in town's voice in that ... all the better, because who's somebody going to more likely listen to, me or [the pastor of a church]?

It seems that one of the most significant resources that religious congregations have to offer is their reputation as a trustworthy institution.

My findings suggest that the material, human, and social capital of local contributions have a significant impact on the work of local service agencies. In addition, the unique faith-based social capital that congregations possess seems to be utilized by local service agencies in various ways to recruit volunteers and clients and to make the work of agencies more credible in the eyes of the community. However, because service agencies and congregations often have different motivations for the service work that they do together, it is necessary for scholars to understand how the relationships and shared resources impact the organizational identities of local service agencies.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Negotiation of Secular and Religious Boundaries

In addition to the contribution of congregational resources, there was another important way that agency – congregation relationships impacted the service agencies in this study. These unique relationships often made it necessary for agencies to engage in some form of boundary work in order to maintain distinctions between secular and religious missions while providing services. Recent sociological literature has examined the boundary work that occurs in social institutions and the professions (for a review see Lamont and Molnár, 2002). For the purposes of this study, however, I refer to boundary work as the organizational activities and strategies used by service agencies to reinforce and maintain secular and religious distinctions between themselves and the congregations that they partnered with.

The relationships that developed between service agencies and religious congregations often represented an interaction between two different types of organizations with different goals and missions. While it has been shown that many congregations engage in social services out of a genuine desire to help community members in need (Cnaan et al., 2002), providing social services is not the primary goal of most congregations. They are religious organizations, and as such their priorities tend to be religious worship, spiritual growth, and evangelism (Ammerman, 2005, pp. 23-33). In contrast, most of the social service agencies that I studied reported existing primarily to provide direct social services to persons in need. Interview responses revealed several

reasons and methods that service agencies worked to reinforce their secular goals and regulate the religious influence of the congregations that they cooperated with.

### *Reasons for Boundary Negotiation*

Establishing and maintaining boundaries with congregations was an important activity for all types of service agencies that I studied. Interviews with directors revealed two primary reasons for developing such boundaries. First, agencies that relied on public funding were often obligated to abide by federal guidelines that dictated the complete separation of religious faith from secular service provision. Some directors explained these guidelines to me as non-negotiable rules that simply had to be followed. As a result, some agencies restricted congregations from providing any type of support that might be construed as religious in nature. Concerns about the separation of church and state were often voiced by agency directors that received public funding. The director of one agency that received a large amount of public funding to provide emergency financial assistance to low-income clients told the following story to illustrate how seriously her agency took the separation of church and state:

I'm not allowed to do anything that's perceived as sectarian.... So we have to be so careful with that. One year, and this was a long time ago, I was being monitored by a federal team. One of our employees had a picture of praying hands on the wall, and we were written up about it. So it is very strict, very very strict separation of church and state in every program that we do.

Interview responses like this one suggested that dependence on public funding is one significant reason that agencies engage in boundary work. Generally, I found that those agencies most dependent upon public funding tried to maintain the most distinct boundaries. However, there were exceptions. One director of a publicly funded agency that provided substance abuse treatment indicated that his agency did not have strict

guidelines on religious involvement or on what congregations were allowed to do. In fact, he indicated that several local congregations provided a weekly Bible study for agency clients. In contrast to other agencies, he did not perceive the federal guidelines as prohibiting any and all religious activities. In addition, the director of a government agency that provided social services to families and children told me that her agency had actually hired someone to work with local congregations in the hopes of increasing the level of congregational involvement. These responses suggest that while many publicly funded agencies interpreted federal guidelines to mean that religion and secular service provision should remain completely separate, there were some agencies that interpreted guidelines less strictly.

The second reason that many service agencies engaged in boundary work was because they were concerned that religious involvement might prevent their agency from being able to reach out to the most diverse group of clients possible. The agency directors that I interviewed expressed a desire to provide services indiscriminately; serving any and all that had need. Consequently, religious influence was viewed by some agency directors as a liability in their agencies' efforts to serve indiscriminately. As a result these agencies worked to maintain boundaries that limited the religious activities of supporting congregations. The director of one shelter for women told me that she welcomed congregational support for her agencies' programs and services, but that she could not allow congregation members to conduct religious services or invite her clients to their congregation. Because her agency served a very diverse group of clients, she was afraid that the involvement of some congregations might keep some women from getting the help that they needed. She expressed her concerns to me during our interview:

I don't know that we could really hook into a whole lot because it's just the separation of religion.... We are truly open to all faiths, all cultures, all religions, all sexual preferences, across the board. It does not matter what's going on, and it is not my job to come over here and convince you.... We're not judgmental.

During the same interview she emphasized to me that:

Everybody's not Judeo-Christian, everybody's not whatever, and to come in here we accept anybody and everybody. We don't get into those discussions. I don't want anybody to come in here and see we got Bible study every Tuesday or something.

In addition to these reasons for engaging in boundary work, faith-based service agencies also gave religious or theological reasons for attempting to maintain clear boundaries with their congregational partners. One director of a faith-based agency that provided healthcare resources to low-income clients stated that his understanding of evangelism and religious mission involved providing help to individuals with no strings attached, and his agency required congregational partners to agree to provide services with no strings attached before establishing a relationship with them. Another director of a faith-based agency that provided emergency assistance to low-income families and children explained his agency's reasons for establishing boundaries with the congregations that they work with in this way:

[We] want to be respectful and sensitive to client self-determination. I embrace that more because of my theology than I do because of a code of ethics. My theology says that I do believe we have free conscience, and if anything is forced or coerced or manipulated that's not authentic, that's not an authentic free response, and God is only interested in a free response.

The comments of agency directors suggest that reliance on public funding and agency policies encouraging tolerance and acceptance are often two important reasons that service agencies limit congregational involvement. Regardless of the reasons for engaging in boundary work, however, there were two primary ways that service agencies



in this study maintained the boundaries between the secular work of their agencies and the religious missions of the congregations that supported them. First, agencies tried to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate forms of congregational involvement. Second, agencies tried to restrict or regulate religious evangelism within the context of service provision.

### *Regulating Forms of Congregational Involvement*

One of the ways that agencies attempted to reinforce boundaries between themselves and the religious congregations that they worked with was by labeling certain forms of congregational involvement inappropriate. In most of the service agencies that I studied there were certain activities that congregational volunteers were not allowed to engage in during social service provision. Inappropriate activities included things such as leading a Bible study or worship service, praying with clients, or engaging in religious evangelism. Any overtly religious activity might be labeled inappropriate within the context of service provision. As the director of one service agency that provided counseling services to public school students informed me, these sorts of activities were, “just off limits.” However, interview responses also indicated that it was not always an easy task for directors to determine which activities were overtly religious and therefore ought to be disallowed.

The director of an emergency shelter reported that her agency did not allow religious services to be conducted within the agency. However, she also told me that sometimes when congregational groups volunteered it was not uncommon for agency clients to request a prayer time with congregational volunteers. The agency viewed that as a private interaction between agency clients and local congregations, and as such the

agency was not directly involved. The director of this agency explained it to me this way:

You know we don't have any particular church come in here and deliver a message. You know if they're in here providing an activity and somebody requests prayer and that's between that individual and that client, between that congregation or that church member and that client. It's nothing you know that we get involved in.... That's between the clients and them. We're just basically the facility. And to make sure of that, because that can affect our funding, you know.

Similarly, in a faith-based agency that received significant public funding to help low-income clients become homeowners, the director explained to me how his agency deals with volunteers who want to engage in religious outreach during service provision:

They do a service project in the morning and then outreach in the afternoon. We're not a part of the outreach per se and that's, it's tricky and we support it, but we also have, some of our funding is federal so we have to kind of stay away from that.... The primary thing is we're not funding it, we're not overtly doing it, you know.

His agency makes it possible for congregational volunteers to engage in religious outreach. Yet, there is an attempt to regulate when and where such outreach can take place. Responses such as these suggest that service agencies negotiate boundaries by setting rules around when and where certain religious activities are allowed. These sorts of boundaries allowed agencies to make distinctions between officially sanctioned agency programs and the religious activities of congregational volunteers and supporters, even if somewhat contrived. Whether or not clients perceived such distinctions remains unknown. However, these strategies allowed agencies to say that they were not supporting religious activities.

### *Religious Evangelism*

There were a few agencies in this study that allowed and even encouraged religious evangelism during the provision of services. In fact, three of the faith-based agencies that were engaged in wedded relationships with local congregations indicated that evangelism was one aspect of their agency's mission. However, even the directors of these agencies said that they had developed strategies for regulating evangelism. The director of an agency that provided job training to low-income clients reported that she often wished that she could give the names of agency clients to local congregations so that those congregations might be able to contact her clients and offer them support as they moved through the job training program to full-time employment. She acknowledged, however, that professional standards and expectations about privacy and confidentiality kept her from being able to do so. She told me that social workers within her agency had to constantly remind her of these sorts of things. Nevertheless, agencies that openly encouraged religious evangelism were the exception. Most directors reported that direct evangelism was not appropriate in the context of providing social services to agency clients. Some agencies expressed being open to evangelism if it occurred outside the agency. The strategies that agencies developed to regulate religious evangelism varied, however, from agency to agency.

Some agencies reported having formal policies that outlined how much volunteers and staff members were allowed to share with agency clients about their religious faith. The director of a faith-based agency that relied heavily on congregational volunteers in order to staff its programs told me that, "The policy of our organization is not to proselytize, not to convert anyone from any type of faith belief to another, or lack of a

faith belief to having faith beliefs.” He told me that all volunteers were trained in this respect and were expected to honor these guidelines. Both religious and secular agencies expressed similar sorts of restrictions on religious proselytizing. The director of a government agency explained to me that her agency had strict policies in place that kept volunteers and staff from being able to discuss their faith with clients at all, and that they were not allowed to pray with clients.

Despite seemingly clear rules against it, agencies recognized that congregational volunteers often engaged in social service with a desire to share their faith, or at the very least as a way of putting their faith into action. The director of one faith-based agency that frequently used congregational volunteers to provide services to low-income and homeless clients shared from his experiences with congregations:

[Congregational volunteers] more often than not will be pretty hyper-evangelical ... So they come in with a mindset that we’re going to go down and get those poor black kids saved, you know? And we reject that as a mindset. We don’t push. We don’t even really allow group evangelism.

For this reason some agencies allowed evangelism but placed restrictions around when, where, and how it could take place. The director of a large faith-based agency that provided support services to families and children told me that his agency allowed evangelism with clients, but that out of a respect for them and out of a belief that coercive evangelism does more harm than good his agency regulated religious evangelism. He explained his agency’s concerns about evangelism to me this way:

We do want to share our faith, and work with churches to share our faith. But ... we want to be very careful and respectful that it’s not done in an abusive or manipulative heavy-handed sort of way. And, of course, that becomes a pretty subjective call. What does that mean? What that means to me and what that means to somebody else is probably two very different things.

The director of a private agency that worked to build mentoring relationships between adults and at-risk children expressed her agencies approach this way:

The other thing that I notice about them is that they do want to share their faith with them, and like I said before that's not something that we really discourage.... That's something that we tell them if that's something that you would tell your friends, then that's something that you can tell your [student], and that you do need to respect the fact that their parents might have their own set of values. But, that's something to talk about. We get a lot of questions; can I take them to church? And we're like sure, if it's ok with their parents. And most of the time their parents are so excited about it. So I think that's really another one of those misconceptions.

Other agencies had less clearly defined boundaries around the issue of evangelism. In some situations it became difficult for service directors to determine what constituted religious evangelism. Clearly, verbally sharing one's faith was typically seen as a form of evangelism. However, forms of non-verbal communication were less clear. For example, one director of a private service agency that provides counseling and support to public school children through federally funded programs explained to me how difficult it had been for his agency to deal with this issue:

What we have struggled with is where you draw the line on personal non-verbal declarations or expressions of faith and things like that.... What we've struggled with is what's the line. You know? I mean at what point does, if it's a three quarter inch gold cross on a necklace it's a kind of a cultural thing, but if it's three quarters of a foot you know.... How do we, as an organization, figure out and define what the line is, and not just on things you're wearing, but what you've got on your bulletin board, your desk, and things like that.

Findings indicate that social service agencies of all types engaged in certain types of boundary work. Because their organizational missions often differed from the religious missions of the congregations that they cooperated with, the service agencies in this study reported having to develop specific strategies and guidelines that helped them regulate the religious involvement of local congregations. Service agencies engaged in

two primary types of boundary work; limiting the types of religious programs and services that congregations could offer to clients and regulating when and where religious evangelism could take place.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Discussion

The social service activities of religious congregations have come under increased scrutiny in recent years, largely due to public discussions surrounding the government funding of faith-based social service programs (Knippenberg, 2003). As a result, some congregational scholars have begun to examine the number and type of social service programs provided by local congregations in more detail (Cnaan et al., 2002; Chaves, 2004; Dudley and Roozen, 2001; Wineburg, 2001). What researchers have discovered is that congregations do support community social services, but that they tend to do so by joining with other community agencies (Ammerman, 2005; Chaves, 2004). They do not typically establish their own social service programs. However, very few studies have examined these relationships in any detail. Findings from this study of the agency – congregation relationships in one Texas city suggest several important things about these relationships.

First, the relationships that developed between social service agencies and religious congregations in Waco, Texas were widespread. Out of thirty-one agencies studied, only three reported having no contact with local religious congregations at all. Almost every social service agency studied had developed some type of relationship with a congregation at one point in time. In addition, these relationships existed to enhance the provision of some social service. This suggests that congregations were often seen by service agencies as viable partners in the provision of local social services. Mark Chaves

(2004) and Bob Wineburg (2001) have both suggested that congregations should not be viewed as an alternative source of social services since they are already deeply embedded in local systems of social service provision, aiding and assisting other agencies. Findings from this study support this idea of network embeddedness. Congregations are supporting social services through the relationships that they build with other agencies. However, the relationships that developed between the service agencies and congregations in this study were not all uniform.

Different agencies related to congregations in very different ways. In fact, findings suggest that each service agency was likely to have very different relationships with each congregation that it cooperated with. Interview responses from agency directors suggested that there were four basic types of relationships that service agencies developed with local congregations; wedded relationships, partnerships, adoptive relationships, and functional relationships. In addition there were several agencies that reported having no relationships with local congregations for several reasons. This research proposes that these different styles of relating to congregations may occur within all types of service agencies. The relationship that develops often depends on a number of factors including the levels of formality, interaction, and resource sharing. Researchers have proposed typologies for categorizing the faith-involvement level of social service agencies in the past (Jeavons, 1998; Search for Common Ground, 2002; Sider and Unruh, 2004; Smith and Sosin, 2001), but this research suggests more attention needs to be paid to the different types of relationships that develop between congregations and all types of service agencies. Paying attention to the types of



relationships that exist will tell researchers more about the contributions that congregations make to service provision in local contexts.

The second finding of this research is that the contribution of material, human, and social resources was an important way that local congregations supported the work of service agencies in this study. Similar to previous congregational studies, findings from this study suggest that the financial resources, the physical facilities, and the volunteer labor that congregations possess are particularly valuable resources to local social service agencies. Without these contributions, the work of social service agencies would likely be impaired. In addition, findings from this research suggest that these contributions represent a significant financial savings for many local service agencies. However, these are not the only significant contributions that congregations make to social service agencies.

Recent scholars in the sociology of religion have proposed that congregations also possess unique faith-based social capital that encourages community involvement among congregation members (Bartkowski and Regis, 2003). The faith-based resources of congregations are not as easily measured, but this study confirms that the presence of these resources is particularly valuable to social service agencies. The service agencies in this study mentioned benefiting particularly from the social networks that congregations possessed as well as the community credibility that local religious congregations had. Findings suggest that more research needs to examine the community impacts of congregational networks and the religious character of congregations that make them trustworthy institutions.

Finally, research findings illuminated several ways that social service agencies worked to maintain secular and religious boundaries between themselves and the congregations that they cooperated with. Service agencies of all types developed organizational strategies for limiting the religious influence of their congregational partners. Agencies tried to regulate when and where religious activities such as Bible study, prayer, and evangelism were allowed to occur within the context of service provision. However, this research also reveals that the strategies used by social service agencies were not uniform and were often arbitrary and difficult to explain. This suggests that the level of religious involvement in social service agencies varies a great deal and that much more research needs to be done to understand how this religious involvement impacts the actual provision of services. Very little research has addressed how service recipients perceive religious involvement in social service programs (Wuthnow, 2004).

There are several limitations of this study that must also be taken into consideration. Because the sample included thirty-one social service agencies from one community it is not possible to generalize these research findings to the larger population of service agencies in the U.S. or Texas. In addition, recent sociological literature has emphasized the influence of ecological factors on institutional organization and culture (Ammerman, 1997; Bartkowski and Regis, 2003; Eisland, 2000). The social service agencies in this study provided services in a midsized city located in McLennan County, Texas. McLennan County is approximately 60 percent Christian (Jones et al., 2000), located in the Bible belt area of the Southwestern U.S., and home to one of the largest Christian universities in the U.S. It is possible that the immediate religious ecology has

had a significant impact on the likelihood of social service agencies developing relationships with local congregations.

Despite these limitations, findings from this study suggest that religious congregations may be viewed by social service agencies as valuable partners. Congregations offer service agencies a variety of material, human, and social resources that agencies access in order to provide services to their clients. These relationships also make it necessary for service agencies to develop strategies and policies to regulate religious involvement in the provision of services. Further research into the complex and changing nature of agency – congregation relationships is needed. There is still much unknown about how these relationships affect service agencies, their clients, local congregations, and communities.

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