



Elevating the Role of Faith-Inspired Impact in the Social Sector

By Jeri Eckhart Queenan, Peter Grunert, and Devin Murphy

When one of Washington, DC’s largest human services providers —[Catholic Charities DC \(CCDC\)](#)—fell on hard times, its board recruited an experienced leadership team to help keep its doors open to the community’s most vulnerable.

Monsignor John Enzler joined CCDC in 2011 as CEO amid a perfect storm of shrinking government funding and a philanthropic community that was still reeling from the impact of the Great Recession. “It was a tough time. Needs were rising. Resources were falling. There was a lot of dysfunction. The budget relied on public funds. [My] friends thought I was crazy and told me not to take the job,” he admits. But Enzler felt called to the work. “For Catholic Charities, the question is never ‘what’s your background?’ It’s only ‘how can we help?’ I want to be a change agent for people whose lives are a daily struggle for food, shelter, and clothing.”

Unlike many human services organizations, CCDC had philanthropic benefactors who were willing to place a significant bet on the organization. Enzler says the turnaround began with two gifts totaling \$6 million, which gave CCDC the flexibility to hire a seasoned chief operating officer and a chief financial officer who brought a lot of efficiencies to CCDC’s services in education, employment, and housing. With the help of COO Patrick Dunne, a retired rear admiral of the US Navy, and CFO Mary Jane Morrow, a former partner at accounting firm Grant Thornton, Enzler and the team mapped out a plan to evaluate and cut programs that were not sustained through funding, and reinvest precious unrestricted dollars in programs that were core to CCDC’s mission and impact.

The timely intervention of philanthropy buttressed a critical bedrock of care for individuals in our nation’s capital. The result: CCDC is financially strong—nearing completion of a \$100 million capital campaign—and provided food, shelter, and educational services to over 140,000 individuals in the metropolitan DC area, in the year ending June 30, 2019.¹ When need grew highest during the COVID-19 pandemic, CCDC was able to mobilize its community of donors to raise \$2.4 million in donations for personal protective equipment and provide 1.1 million meals.²

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AMY GOLDMAN, CEO, GHR FOUNDATION

In our research, we found that faith-inspired organizations account for 40 percent of social safety³ net spending across a sample of six cities, which vary in size and demographics.

1 “[Meaning and Purpose: Annual Report 2018-2019](#),” Catholic Charities DC.

2 “[The Power of Giving and How You Can Help](#),” Catholic Charities DC.

3 The “social safety net” is the public and private support that helps people confront the numerous challenges of experiencing poverty. For many, it is often synonymous with human services, and in the social sector, it represents multiple billions of dollars in services aimed at helping people achieve and maintain well-being—across their lifespan, from cradle to grave. See Susan Nall Bales et al., “[Talking Human Services: A FrameWorks MessageMemo](#),” FrameWorks Institute, January 8, 2015.

Yet, while some individual philanthropists and community foundations have recognized faith-inspired organizations as platforms for impact, that perspective has not translated into funding from the largest institutional philanthropies—particularly those seeking to address the effects of poverty and injustice.

“It seems the social sector has an ‘allergy’ to faith-based organizations,” says Amy Goldman, CEO of the GHR Foundation. “There are numerous faith actors doing critical things that—but for them—would not be accomplished. We need to demystify faith-based organizations and close the funding gap, because they can be innovative, high performing, and have a tremendous impact.”

As mission-driven leaders and researchers, we seek to contribute to a robust dialogue about the role of faith-inspired organizations in driving social change. This article reflects independent analysis of data, interviews with field experts, and perceptions of the social sector honed over the 20 years of The Bridgespan Group’s work in the sector. We are grateful for the work of others. For example, Philanthropy Roundtable, Lake Institute on Faith & Giving at Indiana University’s Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, and the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University have pioneered perspectives and thinking on how to speak to the magnitude of faith-inspired impact in the social sector. Additionally, the religious focus of initiatives by the Aspen Institute, Auburn Seminary, Fetzer Institute, Interfaith Youth Core, Repairers of the Breach, and Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship underscores that there remain many open questions about the boundaries and assumptions that have been brought to the topic. Not least of those questions is: what opportunities are missed by neglecting such a sizeable share of the ecosystem of support for individuals, families, and communities?

Diverse Traditions United by a Common Focus

As varied as faith traditions are, many share a common concern with fighting poverty. In Islam there is a moral imperative to support those in need. Zakat, one of the five pillars of Islam, requires Muslims to give alms or charity to the poor.⁴ In Judaism, numerous mitzvot or commandments relate to tzedakah, the Hebrew word for charity⁵ that also connotes a sentiment of justice or righteousness.⁶ The concern for caring for those in need is a core tenet of Christian faith, with churches from the earliest centuries providing social services and helping to serve the needs of those experiencing poverty.⁷ Likewise, Hindus believe that dharma, one’s religious duty, necessitates dāna—generosity or giving.⁸ Dāna is a virtue embraced with Buddhism and other faith traditions, as well.⁹ And a hallmark of the Sikh faith is langar, the provision and sharing of a free meal to promote selfless service.¹⁰

4 Marquisha Lawrence Scott and Ram A. Cnaan, “[Religious Congregations and Poverty Alleviation in the Age of New Public Governance](#),” *Nonprofit Policy Forum* 8, No. 4 (March 2018).

5 Ibid.

6 Marty Friedlander, “[Tzedakah, the Jewish Concept of Charity](#),” *Haaretz*, August 16, 2015.

7 Daleep Mukarji, “[Traditions of Giving in Christianity](#),” *Alliance*, September 1, 2001.

8 Sharada Sugirtharajah, “[Traditions of Giving in Hinduism](#),” *Alliance*, September 1, 2001.

9 Peter Joseph, “[Traditions of Giving in Buddhism](#),” *Alliance*, December 1, 2000.

10 Priya Krishna, “[How to Feed Crowds in a Protest or Pandemic? The Sikhs Know](#),” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2020.

Across each of these traditions, faith has inspired the founding of both houses of worship where people can gather as well as aligned nonprofit organizations that seek to translate many of the religious doctrines of charity and caring for those most in need into professionalized services offered to communities across the country. Like other parts of the social sector, this subsector of nonprofits has evolved to represent varying degrees of faith intensity and differing levels of ties to the faith institutions that originally gave rise to their founding.

Given this broad spectrum of religiosity,¹¹ we chose to describe these nonprofits with the umbrella term “faith-inspired,” rather than the more commonly used “faith-based,” because we think it more accurately respects the diversity of organizations where faith has played and continues to play a role.

Unpacking the Separation of Faith and Funders

Before we get ahead of ourselves, we need to acknowledge that we hold two truths in tension about the role of faith in society.

Discomfort with faith-inspired nonprofits is often grounded in both searing personal experiences and a complicated historical relationship between faith traditions and many areas of social justice. Throughout history and into the present moment, major faith traditions have been the source of harm, trauma, and hardship. The involvement of faith leaders and institutional protectors in sexual abuse scandals along with systematic discrimination and targeted violence against Indigenous, Jewish, and Muslim peoples come to mind. The stances taken by various faith traditions on gender roles and marriage equality run counter to the values of some funders and their advisors. Others are informed by their religious beliefs in how they deliver services, for example, by excluding LGBTQ couples from adoption and foster care services, an issue being adjudicated right now in the nation’s highest court. And some faith traditions and the work of some faith-inspired organizations have taken positions on reproductive health and rights protections that are not supported by the majority of Americans. These issues leave many funders wary.

At the same time, faith-inspired impact has been at the core of social movements that have transformed the United States—ranging from Quakerism among white abolitionists

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DAN CARDINALI, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
INDEPENDENT SECTOR

¹¹ Harvard Kennedy School Professor Stephen Goldsmith’s “continuum of religiosity” is helpful here: Stephen Goldsmith, Bill Emicke, and Chris Pineda, “[Faith-Based Organizations Versus Their Secular Counterparts: A Primer for Local Officials](#),” Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard Kennedy School, Spring 2006.

to the Christian temperance movement in women’s suffrage to the interfaith organizing (principally led by Black preachers, Catholic priests, Jewish rabbis) that formed the core of civil rights era organizing. In many ways, organizers from Faith in Action (formerly PICO National Network) and the Poor People’s Campaign are continuing the long legacy of faith-based organizing for civil rights that extends back to the Congress of Racial Equality, NAACP, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

This complex history—with its various tensions of conservatism, charitable humanitarianism, and progressive social justice liberation—can make it hard for funders to discern which faith communities are aligned with their values, let alone with their impact objectives.

Additionally, over the past two decades, the largest institutional funders have increasingly adopted the frame of “strategic philanthropy” as their guide for investing. That has led to a dichotomy among funders, perhaps an unfair one, between strategic investments that are designed to “solve” society’s most pressing challenges and more place-focused and people-centered forms of charity that are designed to “serve” the ongoing needs of communities. Many faith-inspired organizations fall in the latter camp.

To be sure, some faith-inspired organizations retain language, context, and values that speak to their ability to serve those continued needs while also adopting the very types of strategic approaches that have come in vogue for strategic philanthropy. Yet even for them, the presence of those tensions and the inability to translate effectively between faith-inspired leaders and institutional philanthropy leaders creates conditions for misperception.

“Faith-based movements play a singular role in the founding history and evolving context of the United States,” says Dan Cardinali, president and CEO of the nonprofit membership organization, Independent Sector. “To unlock their immense potential, philanthropy has to bring the right competencies and a nuanced understanding of their values and perspectives.”

Our review of the role of faith in communities—especially low-income communities of color—pushes us to reconsider faith-inspired nonprofits in light of the continued role faith plays in the lives of so many people. Despite recent declines in religious affiliation,¹² nearly three out of every four Americans remain religiously affiliated.¹³

Given this nuanced reality, we believe that the pendulum may have swung too far in the direction of strategic and institutional philanthropy’s avoidance—at the cost of evaluating the merits—of faith-inspired organizations that are working toward shared aims. To be clear, we are not suggesting that funders should reallocate their grant dollars away from current recipients toward faith-inspired organizations. Rather, in this article, we seek to address some common myths and misperceptions that unduly reinforce the skepticism, and provide some guidance for philanthropists seeking to understand how to assess and align on common values and commitments to social justice, particularly as they focus on sorely needed new investments in safety net services.

12 “In US, Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019.

13 “Religious Landscape Study,” Pew Research Center.

Dispelling Myths That Leave Impact on the Table

“I have persistently observed [among my peers] the discomfort when it comes to faith-inspired organizations. It’s a disservice to the impact we all seek.”

NOORAIN KHAN, DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT, FORD FOUNDATION AND MEMBER, MUSLIM PHILANTHROPIC COUNCIL, INDIANA UNIVERSITY LILLY FAMILY SCHOOL OF PHILANTHROPY

In 2019, *Philanthropy* magazine, a publication of Philanthropy Roundtable, devoted an entire issue to “Faith and Giving”—documenting the ways faith, including faith-inspired organizations and religious givers, contributes to social healing. Its research found that faith-inspired organizations are at the forefront of both care and recovery for those experiencing homelessness. Fifty-eight percent of the emergency shelter beds in 11 surveyed cities are maintained by religious providers, who also deliver many of the addiction, health care, education, and job services needed to help those experiencing homelessness regain their independence. In the US, local congregations provide 120,000 programs that assist the unemployed and 26,000 programs to help people living with HIV/AIDS—the equivalent of one faith-affiliated program for every 46 people infected with the virus.¹⁴

The data highlighted by *Philanthropy* magazine illustrate that the connection between faith-inspired activities and impact is both deep and profound. We set out to compile data and speak to more leaders in the field in order to further this exploration. And what we found were three myths about faith-inspired organizations—and several opportunities for philanthropy to more fully engage with faith-inspired impact in the social sector. What follows is our attempt to elevate stories of exemplary faith-inspired organizations that are pushing the boundaries of innovation, community engagement, and impact.

Myth # 1—Secularism is the dominant frame for America

A lot of media attention is given to the increasing disaffiliation with faith traditions in the United States. Indeed, the number of Americans who do not identify with any organized religion rose from 17 percent in 2009 to 26 percent in just 10 years.¹⁵ However, nearly half of this disaffiliation is driven by individuals who no longer identify with a particular religious tradition, rather than actively identify with agnosticism or atheism. The overwhelming majority of Americans still affiliate with a religious tradition.¹⁶ And the role of faith is often more important in communities that have been marginalized by, and left without access to, public institutions such as hospitals and health centers.

Pew research finds 75 percent of Black adults rank religion as “very important” in one’s life compared to 49 percent of white adults. Moreover, 83 percent of Black adults attend religious services weekly, monthly, or at least a few times a year, compared to 66 percent of white adults.¹⁷ Additionally, 82 percent of adults making less than \$30,000 said that religion

14 Karl Zinsmeister, “Less God, Less Giving?” *Philanthropy*, Winter 2019.

15 “In US, Decline of Christianity...,” Pew Research Center.

16 “Religious Landscape Study,” Pew Research Center.

17 “Religious Landscape Study: Racial and Ethnic Composition,” Pew Research Center.

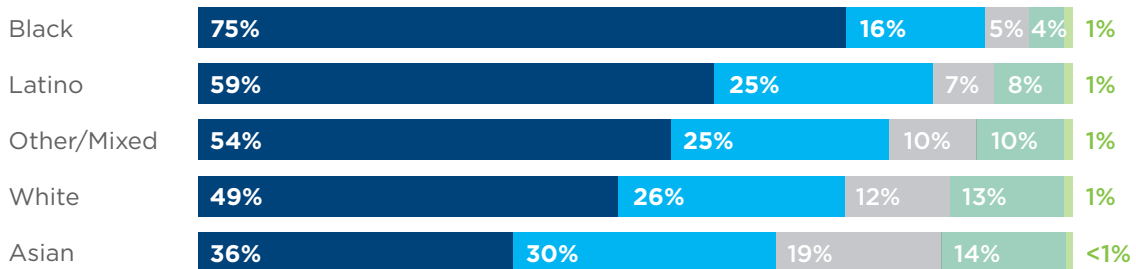
was “very important” or “somewhat important” in one’s life compared to 69 percent of adults making over \$100,000; comparing adults with a high school education or less and adults with advanced degrees reveals a nearly identical gap.¹⁸ Thus, secularism as a trend seems to have taken more of a hold in whiter, wealthier, and more educated segments of American society. But the focus on disaffiliation overlooks the broad swath of communities for whom faith remains a central and animating force of community connection. Faith institutions can be critical vectors of support in these communities.

“Secularism is the dominant narrative in the US, but often less so in vulnerable communities, in my experience. It’s a disservice to not even acknowledge it,” says Kashif Shaikh, co-founder and executive director of the Pillars Fund, a grantmaking organization that invests in American Muslim organizations.

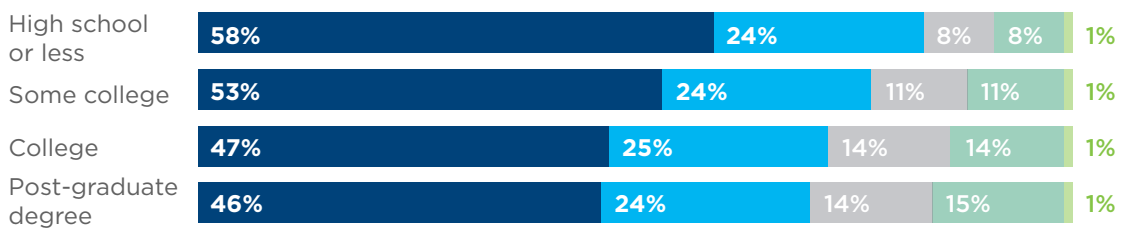
Faith Is Differentially Important in the Lives of Americans

Percentage of adults who say religion is... ■ Very important ■ Somewhat important ■ Not too important ■ Not at all important ■ Don't know

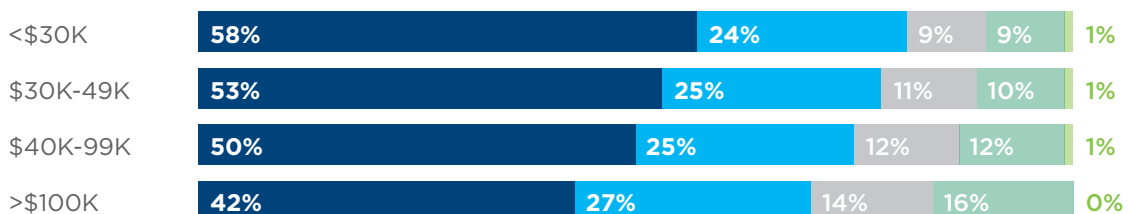
Racial and Ethnic Composition



Educational Attainment



Income Distribution



Source: Pew Research Center, “Religious Landscape Study” (2014).

18 “Religious Landscape Study: Income Distribution,” Pew Research Center.

Houses of worship can play an outsized role in providing basic services in Black neighborhoods because philanthropy works in nontraditional ways in Black communities, ranging from tithing to giving circles. “The majority of [Black people’s] philanthropic dollars goes to the church,” says Christal Jackson, founder of Head and Heart Philanthropy, a Black venture philanthropy organization.¹⁹ The many fixtures of the “Black church”—which includes Black protestant denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, AME Zion, the National Baptist Convention, Church of God in Christ, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church—provide critical social services in Black neighborhoods, ranging from meal programs, child care, housing for the elderly, AIDS ministries, job training for those formerly incarcerated, and other anti-poverty efforts. These services are woven tightly into the social fabric of many communities.²⁰

Similar to the influence of the Black church, the Catholic Church plays an important role supporting Latinx communities, especially newcomers to the United States. More than 30 million Latinx individuals in the United States identify as Catholic,²¹ including 13.5 million immigrants.²² Collectively, Catholic identity accounts for 48 percent of the US Latinx population.²³

Because new immigrants often have low trust in public systems of support,²⁴ they tend to avoid accessing resources even when needed. Against this backdrop, Catholic parishes have served as a safe haven for recent immigrants, and particularly Latinx immigrants. Along the US-Mexico border, for example, they help with refugee services and resettlement, and have taken the lead in reuniting undocumented immigrant children separated from their families.²⁵ In addition to finding community and fellowship, parishes have also acted as the connector to critical safety net supports and services provided by trusted nonprofits in the region. Other faith traditions have provided similar supports to new immigrants.

Moreover, consider the role of faith communities in rural America. Rural counties have 80 percent more congregations per capita than other counties in the United States. A field report conducted by Bridgespan and the National 4-H Council documented that congregations and religious institutions in rural communities often directly deliver critical support to those experiencing poverty in the absence of direct service secular nonprofits.²⁶ As one philanthropic leader noted during that research: “A lot of what we think of as the social sector in small towns happens through churches.”²⁷

19 Lilly Workneh, “[Black Philanthropy Month: Philanthropy Is Not Just for the Wealthy](#),” *The Grio*, August 31, 2014.

20 “[God in America Article: The Black Church](#),” PBS American Experience.

21 J.D. Long-García, “[The Hispanic Catholic Church in the US Is Growing, Survey Confirms](#),” *America: The Jesuit Review*, May 4, 2018.

22 “[Statistical Summary](#),” Fifth National Encuentro of Hispanic/Latino Ministry, 2018.

23 “[Religious Landscape Study: Latinos](#),” Pew Research Center.

24 Krista M. Pereira et al., “[Barriers to Immigrants’ Access to Health and Human Services](#),” ASPE Research Brief, May 2012.

25 Rhina Guidos, “[As Immigration Policy Changes, so Does Work of Catholic Organizations](#),” *Catholic News Service*, June 21, 2019.

26 Mark McKeag et al., “[Social Mobility in Rural America: Insights from Communities Whose Young People Are Climbing the Income Ladder](#),” The Bridgespan Group, November 14, 2018.

27 Ibid.

While the religious disaffiliation trend is rightfully giving pause to faith leaders seeing specific pockets of decline, many faith-inspired organizations are not standing on the sidelines. Rather, they are taking action to address the trend and re-engage different demographics in social-change efforts. Philanthropists would do well to take note, as David P. King, director of the Lake Institute points out: “Many major foundations moved away from directly funding religion but now have rediscovered that if you want to work on equity, with grassroots organizations in the urban core of major cities, you need to work with congregations and faith organizations.”

Myth #2—Faith-inspired organizations are a small portion of the social sector

In the absence of a comprehensive analysis, we found several sources that suggest faith-inspired organizations comprise a third or more of all nonprofits. For example, giving to religiously affiliated organizations (which includes donations to congregations) represents nearly one-third of all giving in the United States.²⁸ Roughly a third of the 50 largest nonprofits in the country have a faith orientation.²⁹ And 40 percent of international nongovernmental organizations are faith-inspired.³⁰

We sought to add to that mosaic of data with a rigorous analysis of the social safety net, one of the social sector’s largest segments.³¹ We analyzed Candid’s GuideStar data on nonprofits and conducted expert interviews to identify the secular and faith-inspired nonprofits that provide critical basic-needs services in six US cities. We found that faith-inspired nonprofits account for 36 percent of “safety net spending” in Washington, DC, and 46 percent in Detroit. In Amarillo, Texas, it is 71 percent. Across our six-city sample, the weighted average was 40 percent—representing two out of every five dollars spent on safety net services.

And those numbers are just from the nonprofits we were able to observe. Many congregations—whose information is not available through comparable datasets—also provide direct support via mutual aid, volunteering, and contributions that are not captured in IRS reporting. For example, the infrastructure of gurdwaras, places of worship in the Sikh tradition, has proven helpful to fill food insecurity needs that resulted from the COVID-19 crisis in communities across the United States.³² As a result, the proportion of vital safety net services that could be described as faith-inspired impact is likely larger.

Taken together, the data demonstrate that faith-inspired organizations are a significant-enough proportion to merit attention from funders.

28 “Giving USA 2020: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2019,” Giving USA Foundation, researched and written by the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

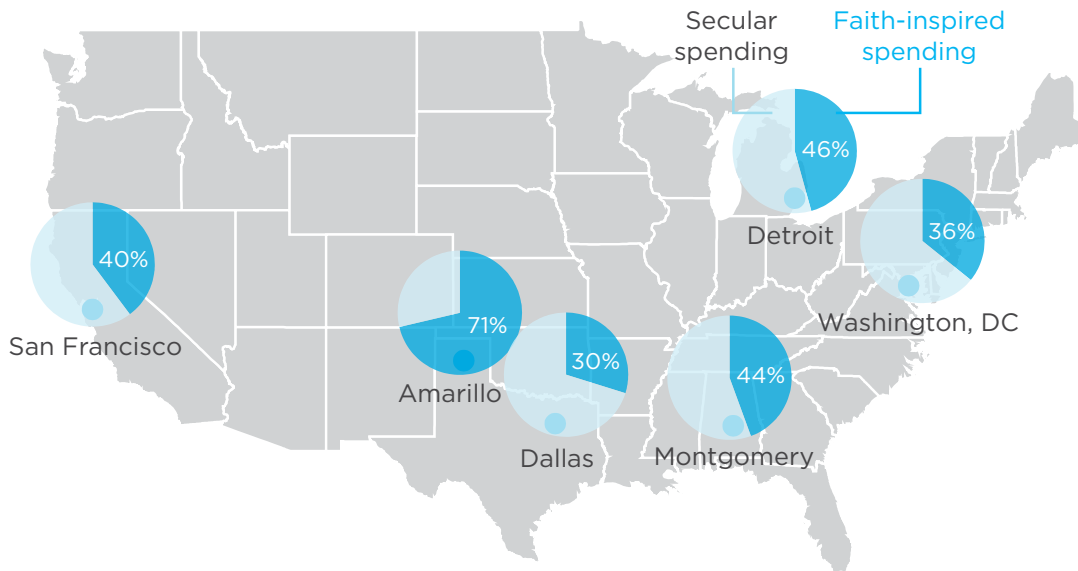
29 Mark Hrywna, “NPT Top 100 (2019): An In-Depth Study of America’s Largest Nonprofits,” *Nonprofit Times*, November 4, 2019.

30 Rachel McCleary and Robert Barro, “Private Voluntary Organizations Engaged in International Assistance, 1939-2004,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3, December 12, 2007.

31 “An NPQ Exclusive: The 2020 Map of the Nonprofit Economy,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, February 24, 2020.

32 Krishna, “How to Feed Crowds.”

Portion of nonprofit safety net spending



Source: The Bridgespan Group

While many safety net organizations receive government reimbursements and benefit from individual giving, philanthropic giving still matters. And the largest philanthropies have, in aggregate, paid less attention to the faith-inspired safety net. Our research found that faith-inspired nonprofits represent only 12 percent of safety net funding for the 15 largest private foundations in the United States, despite the fact that these organizations provide 40 percent of human services spending in our six-city sample.

Indeed, faith-inspired organizations represent only 2 percent of all grant dollars provided by those top-15 institutional philanthropies. And in our database of “big bet” philanthropic gifts over \$25 million directed at social change, only 2 percent of the dollar value of gifts went to faith-inspired organizations.³³ The stark divides raise questions about the lack of attention from institutional philanthropy, advisors, and intermediaries in the social sector.

This data confirms what some leaders have long observed: faith-inspired nonprofits serve alongside, but separately from, secular human service organizations. “There are two rivers running in parallel,” agrees Rosanne Haggerty, president and CEO of the secular

³³ The Bridgespan Group identified all US donors’ publicly announced 2015–2018 gifts for social change of \$25 million and higher that it could find, using a range of sources and outreach. It included gifts pledged in these years, rather than fulfillments of prior commitments. In ascertaining which commitments go to “social change,” Bridgespan aimed for inclusivity and opted for a broad definition of social change, including all gifts to human services, the environment, and international development, save for a small minority that, upon individual review, clearly fell outside the social-change realm. Although institutional gifts can incorporate social-change concerns, Bridgespan does not include gifts to arts institutions, higher education institutions, medical institutions, or private K-12 schools, unless donors stipulate the gift for antipoverty initiatives or underfunded diseases that disproportionately affect low-income people. Bridgespan includes gifts to religious organizations only when the goal is human services or international development.

nonprofit [Community Solutions](#), which works to end homelessness. “And the separation is not to the benefit of progress.”

Haggerty points out that many faith-inspired organizations have just as much impact as secular ones, and that funders may have a blind spot if they don’t see those nonprofits as part of the same social sector ecosystem. “The philanthropic community needs their eyes opened. Faith-based organizations have to be seen to be incorporated.”

“There are two rivers [faith-inspired and secular human service organizations] running in parallel, and the separation is not to the benefit of progress.”

ROSANNE HAGGERTY, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

To be sure, not all faith-inspired organizations meet the highest standards of impact, scale, and sustainability. But some do—and funders would benefit from understanding and evaluating the various models of social change that faith-inspired organizations represent.

Myth #3—Faith-inspired organizations are stodgy and lack innovation

“There’s a perception that faith-inspired organizations do only direct service work, which is seen as charity—not strategic, innovative, or forward looking,” says Neill Coleman, chief philanthropy officer of Trinity Church Wall Street, which awards more than \$25 million a year in grants to strategic initiatives on homelessness and criminal justice with a racial equity lens, as well as to leadership development and capacity-building for churches. “The point needs to be made that there are innovative and high performing faith-inspired organizations.”

[Jewish Vocational Service](#) (JVS) Boston, for example, is one of the largest and oldest providers of adult education and workforce development services in the Greater Boston area. In 2016, JVS embarked on a \$15 million social impact bond project called Massachusetts Pathways to Economic Advancement (MA Pathways). MA Pathways raised investments from impact investors and philanthropies to tackle workforce development for limited English speakers, with the state repaying investors only if JVS successfully achieved agreed-upon outcomes for participants. In partnership with Social Finance and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, MA Pathways was just the third “pay for success” project in the state. The project enabled JVS to scale its proven workforce development model to help 2,000 immigrants throughout Greater Boston improve their English and find higher wage jobs.³⁴

In addition to its role in nonprofit capital market innovation, JVS has not been afraid to reinvent its services. Given social distancing requirements brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, many of JVS’s traditional approaches to workforce development have been hampered or halted—at a time when its clients need those services more than ever. To address this unforeseen challenge, JVS partnered with MassHire Downtown Boston to develop a national online portal connecting job seekers and employers, offering coaching and virtual job fairs, and helping unemployed individuals access unemployment insurance. Beyond ensuring that JVS can continue to serve its existing clients during the pandemic, this tech-enabled innovation has helped JVS dramatically increase its reach.

34 “[Fact Sheet](#),” Massachusetts Pathways to Economic Advancement Pay for Success Project.

There are many other examples of faith-inspired organizations doing pioneering innovation. Take [FaithAction International House](#), for example, an innovative interfaith organization based in Greensboro, North Carolina. Because few states provide driver's licenses or state IDs to immigrants with limited or no status, millions are without access to crucial services for their well-being and safety. In response, FaithAction developed a community-based ID card program that has also become a tool to foster trust among diverse newcomer communities and local law enforcement. What makes the approach unusual is that, in the process of acquiring an ID, participants must engage in an open dialogue with local law enforcement with whom these immigrants might not otherwise willingly interact. The mood of the sessions is friendly and has proven to build trusting relationships with local police officers. The IDs have to be renewed each year, requiring ongoing dialogues.

Bringing people together from different worlds speaks to FaithAction's interfaith heritage and drives its theory of change. "We talk about FaithAction in a way to reach as many different audiences as possible," says Rev. David Fraccaro, FaithAction's executive director. "I worked hard to learn how to speak the different languages of faith, denominations, and no-faith-at-all so as not to exclude anyone."

In six years, FaithAction's ID program has grown to over 20 communities throughout North Carolina and to six other states from Florida to Oregon. Law enforcement in every community credit the program with increasing the willingness of new immigrants to report when they are the victim of crimes as well as cooperate in police investigations. Local health centers and schools have also found the FaithAction IDs helpful to increase their services' reach into these communities.³⁵

As the A. James & Alice B. Clark Foundation's president and CEO, Joe Del Guercio, explains: "We fund in the Greater Washington, DC, area. From a diligence perspective, the faith-inspired organizations in our portfolio are sharp, disciplined, and analytical. They are also the place where there is trust among a number of underrepresented groups, and there is a faith component to that. Several have attracted people of strong faith with successful careers. ... Overall, there is a significant return on investment."

Tactical Steps To Close the Gap

As we collectively look out on the crises of a global pandemic, our country's racial reckoning, and increasing threats to democratic norms, it is all the more imperative that we look for ways to deeply engage with the systems and institutions that motivate, convene, and establish a sense of community across the lives of millions in this country and billions of people abroad. One way is to build bridges across secular-anchored funding and faith-inspired impact. Here are a few thoughts on potential opportunities for impact.

35 David Fraccaro, "FaithAction ID Card Program - Turning Strangers into Neighbors!" OpenIDEO, October 13, 2019.

View faith-inspired organizations as brokers of trust

“People respond to those to whom they pay their tithes and offerings in ways they would not respond to those to whom they pay their taxes,” says Mike Leavitt, a former governor of Utah, who turned to congregations when he needed to mobilize services. “I remember moments as governor, trying to deal with child welfare issues and foster families. I could stand up and tell compelling stories, but it was difficult to get people to come forward to help. I went to the Catholic bishops and Episcopal bishops and those from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and when they stood at their pulpits and said ‘we have a need,’ the people just came pouring in.”

Similarly, faith institutions hold high levels of trust in Black and Latinx communities. “As a means for intersecting with communities that are rooted in race and ethnicity,” says David Dodson—who is active in the interfaith community in North Carolina and recently retired as president of MDC, a catalyst for social change in the South³⁶—“faith-inspired organizations that are governed, run, and accountable to the people they serve can be excellent partners for funders who wish to build authentic connections and partnerships with underrepresented communities.”

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DAVID DODSON, RETIRED PRESIDENT, MDC

It’s an opportunity that exists across the country. For example, New York State partnered with local congregations in communities of color to turn their churches into COVID-19 testing sites to rapidly increase access to testing. [Northwell Health](#), a nonprofit health care network, worked with the state to open 24 testing sites located in communities of color in and around New York City. The partnership between Northwell, local churches, and the state government came about in direct response to the disproportionate COVID-19 infection and death rates among Black and Latinx New Yorkers. At the time the partnership was announced, 20 of the 21 zip codes with the most COVID-19 hospitalizations in the state had greater-than-average Black and/or Latinx populations.³⁷ New York government officials said that houses of worship were ideal new testing sites because they “have the credibility, authenticity, and the capacity to reach those in the community,” as Congressman Hakeem Jeffries explained at a launch event.³⁸ With trust built in Black communities, the partnership is now turning to the task of raising awareness of vaccination options and when people will have access to them.

36 David Dodson is also a member of the Bridgespan Knowledge Advisory Board.

37 “Amid Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic, Governor Cuomo Launches New Initiative to Expand Access to Testing in Low-Income Communities and Communities of Color,” Press Office of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo, May 9, 2020.

38 “Video, Audio, Photos & Rush Transcript: Amid Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic, Governor Cuomo Launches New Initiative to Expand Access to Testing in Low-Income Communities and Communities of Color,” Press Office of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo, May 9, 2020.

Funders might similarly look for nonprofits that are capable of working with congregations because of the reach they hold in communities. [Family Promise](#), a secular nonprofit, works with 6,000 congregations and organizations across all denominations to provide shelter, food, and support services to families experiencing homelessness. At the heart of Family Promise’s approach is the use of existing community resources, including local religious communities and their 200,000 volunteers, to help families reach sustainable independence.³⁹ The approach has gotten results: 88 percent of people served in the Family Promise shelter program secure permanent housing within nine weeks.⁴⁰

“[Many in the nonprofit sector] are very productivity- and outcomes-focused. Faith helps people be resilient, to hang onto hope, and to make meaning of suffering,” says Casper Ter Kuile, author and founder of Sacred Design Lab, a spiritual research and design consultancy. “It is impossible to measure those things but that doesn’t make them less important. There is beauty in belonging; it inspires people to do the hard things.”

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Extend trust with meaningful dialogue on values

Because they are viewed in light of a higher calling, faith-inspired organizations are highly trusted among their congregants—and that trust can also spill over into local communities. One example is the [Inner-City Muslim Action Network \(IMAN\)](#), founded more than 20 years ago by Rami Nashashibi on Chicago’s South Side. IMAN bridges cultural divides by bringing health and wellness to underserved neighborhoods. For example, IMAN launched the Corner Store Campaign as an effort to improve relationships between Arab storeowners and Black and Latinx neighborhood residents.⁴¹ To build trust, the campaign had to show that the storeowners were invested in the community. On the South Side, many corner stores are the primary sources of food in communities where supermarkets are unwilling to set up shop, leaving residents in “food deserts” that lack access to fresh fruit, vegetables, and meat.

To address this gap, IMAN’s Corner Store Campaign provided avenues to connect store owners to local farmers’ markets and offered microloans and grants to encourage stores to stock fresh foods. Today, tensions among residents and storeowners have significantly decreased, and IMAN now holds month-long community events during Ramadan to foster connection and share in the celebration of breaking the fast. The program has been so successful that Nashashibi was awarded the MacArthur Genius Grant in 2017 for “building

39 “[What We Do](#),” Family Promise.

40 “[Our Impact](#),” Family Promise.

41 “[Rami Nashashibi, Community Leader, Class of 2017](#),” MacArthur Fellows Program.

bridges across racial, religious, and socioeconomic divides to confront the challenges of poverty and disinvestment.”⁴²

Talking about IMAN’s purpose, Nashashibi has said, “[This is] what you do as a Muslim: you commit your life to being a force for good, particularly in neighborhoods and communities that have struggled because of historical injustices, because of profound disparities.”⁴³

Successfully engaging with these organizations hinges on trusting the roles they play in their communities and embarking on a frank, mutual dialogue with faith-based actors about the funder’s motivations. The need to align on values goes both ways, with both funder and organization open about what drives them and where they won’t go. Some leaders we spoke with cautioned anyone hoping to partner with congregational communities to center the communities, not themselves.

Complement the role faith-inspired organizations play by collaborating on solutions for the communities they serve

“Churches are really key anchors in underserved communities,” says Kathryn Pitkin Derose, senior researcher at RAND Corporation, a policy think tank. “They excel at responding to critical needs, and they know those needs in their communities very intimately. When you start to combine efforts with churches, you can really have an important impact on the community as a whole.”⁴⁴

It’s that intimate knowledge of local needs that gives faith-inspired organizations a unique vantage point from which to see distinct challenges. In South Los Angeles, for example, RAND partnered with churches to address HIV. RAND didn’t bring a cookie-cutter solution drawn from academia. Rather, it worked with faith leaders from Black and Latinx churches on strategies that they together thought would make a difference. In this case, the social stigma associated with HIV was holding community members back from getting tested. So the team came up with a strategy that included sample sermons, peer leader trainings, and other approaches to lessen the stigma in those communities. The result: testing rates rose to significantly higher levels in South LA compared to similar communities.

With the help of a federal grant, RAND then engaged church leaders on the next health challenge the community resoundingly pointed to: the obesity epidemic. RAND got back to work with faith leaders.

The collaboration makes a lot of sense. “It’s really about social justice,” says Derose, who is also an ordained deacon. “That’s what propelled me into research addressing health disparities and into a religious service founded on justice. That’s where they overlap.”⁴⁵

42 “Rami Nashashibi, Community Leader, Class of 2017,” MacArthur Fellows Program.

43 Lolly Bowean, “Muslim Activist Named MacArthur Genius,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 11, 2017.

44 Doug Irving, “Faith-Based Organizations Promote Well-Being in Underserved Communities,” *Rand Review*, January 4, 2019.

45 Ibid.

Conclusion

We are standing on the shoulders of many who have long been investing in these questions and have helped us with this work—Philanthropy Roundtable, Lake Institute, and Berkley Center. This initial research on faith-inspired nonprofits and the safety net is our attempt to bring insight and rigorous data to a field where such data is not easily accessible.

We see many avenues for future exploration, as we see the profound intersection between faith-inspired impact and Bridgespan’s work in racial justice, scaling impact, vulnerable populations, peer-driven change, and community-based philanthropy. In addition, there are many other sectors not covered here—global development, peace and conflict resolution, climate change, disaster relief—in which faith-inspired organizations have an outsized or growing impact.

New initiatives by the Aspen Institute, Fetzer Institute, and Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship underscore there is much more that might warrant future study. Here, we are not ending our discussion on faith-inspired impact, but humbly beginning to contribute to the collective work of others.

Jeri Eckhart Queenan and Devin Murphy are partners in The Bridgespan Group’s New York office, where Peter Grunert is manager. The authors also thank Bridgespan former Consultant Liz Calder, Editorial Director Cora Daniels, Associate Consultant Erica Lezama, Case Team Leader Asimina Pantazelos, Manager David Washer, and Senior Editorial Director Larry Yu for their essential collaboration on this article.

Research Methodology

Our team considered a variety of data, including geographical location, population, racial demographics, and religious affiliation (as measured by Gallup polling on religious identity and participation) in order to select a set of dissimilar cities. The analysis focused on Amarillo, Dallas, Detroit, Montgomery, San Francisco, and Washington, DC.

In our review of organizations across the faith-inspired spectrum within those cities, we observed nonprofits as varied in size, mission, programs and services, sources of funding, and geographic scope as their secular counterparts. They span all issue areas, from human trafficking to climate change, and all program models, including direct service, social enterprise, and advocacy. They are single organizations and massive networks that collectively represent billions of dollars in charitable giving, government contracting, and fee-for-service activities in support of community health and well-being.

We decided to focus on those that provide safety net services. To define the social safety net, the team interviewed experts in social welfare and mapped Candid's GuideStar NTEE tax codes to the following categories: child welfare, legal services, health care (including mental and behavioral health), housing, food and income security, and employment services.

Two independent reviewers then pulled data from GuideStar using the following steps for each city:

- Identify all 501(c)(3) charities and remove defunct organizations or those recently acquired.
- Filter out organizations with expenses less than \$5 million in urban areas and \$1 million in rural areas.
- Filter out NTEE codes for issue areas that did not fit the six social safety net categories outlined above. This process filtered out congregations.
- Review the remaining organizations and exclude those that did not appear to focus the majority of their services on direct social safety net provision for the local community (e.g., foundations, hospital systems, senior care housing facilities, and nationally-/internationally-focused organizations).
- Identify organizations that were faith-inspired as defined by 1) expressing faith in their mission, 2) were founded by a faith leader, or 3) were founded by a religious community.

The independent reviewers then reconciled their lists and spot-checked select cities and organizations with experts across Bridgespan.

In order to be conservative and avoid overcounting, our analysis did not count as faith-inspired Goodwill or the YMCA, two of the largest nonprofits in the United States, because these networks now include many local chapters that do not operate as faith-inspired entities, even if some in the network still do. The Salvation Army, because of its legal status as a church, was also excluded.

Because our data analysis intentionally focused on 501(c)(3) nonprofits and did not include congregations, it does not count social services that faith communities themselves deliver. Additionally, while this particular research focused on the United States, we know that faith-inspired organizations also have a significant presence globally, accounting for a third to half of all global development revenues.⁴⁶ Sizing the magnitude of services provided by congregations as well as exploring the implications of faith-inspired impact on global development are areas for future inquiry.

46 Rachel McCleary and Robert Barro, "Private Voluntary Organizations Engaged in International Assistance, 1939-2004."

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