Models for Community Action in Steven's Square: Faith-Based and Community Organization Collaboration

Conducted on behalf of
Steven’s Square Community Organization

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Executive Summary

When the Stevens Square Community Organization (SSCO) embarked on collaboration with the Plymouth Church Neighborhood Foundation (PCNF) in 1999, the goal was to create a development plan and implementation strategy for a specific sector of the neighborhood. As part of that project, both organizations agreed to examine organizational models that might inform future decision-making for their anticipated partnership. This report explores some of the issues involved in partnerships between community organizations and faith-based organizations.

Of primary importance is the fact that PCNF chose not to participate in this portion of the project, thus providing a first-hand example of the difficulties involved in creating an effective collaboration between faith-based organizations and community organizations. This unexpected turn of events led to a re-structuring of the project that ultimately provided a broader examination of the issue.

There are numerous examples of faith-based organizations working in communities across the nation and around the world. Many religious denominations have long-standing traditions of working with a variety of people in need throughout the globe. The objective of this study, however, was to seek out examples where communities and faith-based organizations are actively working together in equal partnership. That proved a much more difficult task. There are very few examples where such partnerships are working effectively. The basic issues revolve around three questions

- How are decisions made? Is community involvement desired, solicited and included in the implementation strategy or are decisions made within a hierarchical, top-down structure?

- Do the partnership organizations and the community share a common vision? Do the organizations understand that it is possible to share a community vision without sharing the values required by a particular religious denomination?

- Are the individuals involved capable of working towards collaborative empowerment?

While this brief study does not provide definitive answers to these questions, it does attempt to suggest a road map for organizations to consider. As more and more societal expectations are placed on faith-based organizations in the US, it becomes increasingly important that those organizations be capable of working collaboratively with communities. The old model of noblesse oblige is not only disrespectful, but also ineffective. New collaborative empowerment models offer a fresh approach that can lead to stronger, healthier communities—and very likely to stronger, healthier faith-based congregations as well.

I. Evolution of Project Goals
When Stevens Square Community Organization (SSCO) initially proposed researching partnerships between community organizations and faith-based organizations, the intent was to develop a model for formalizing the relationship between SSCO and the Plymouth Church Neighborhood Foundation (PCNF), a relatively new faith-based organization working in the Stevens Square neighborhood. It was hoped that the study of existing organizational models would provide guidance for the future working relationship between SSCO and PCNF. The first phase of the study focused on a series of interviews with the board members of each organization, asking the following questions:

1. What are the benefits of working together?
2. What are the costs of working together?
3. Thinking about your organization’s mission, hat do you see as opportunities for collaboration?
4. What areas are off limits for collaboration?
5. Are there examples of partnerships between community organizations and faith-based organizations that you think might offer useful models for SSCO and PCNF?

The SSCO board of directors agreed to participate in these interviews and supported the concept of preparing a study of organizational models that might offer guidance for further development of the relationship between SSCO and PCNF. In part, the SSCO board of directors was eager to learn about alternative models for working with faith-based organizations precisely because the relationship with PCNF had involved several serious conflicts in the preceding months. In two instances, neighborhood residents were sufficiently angered by PCNF actions that Housing & Development Committee meetings erupted into heated arguments. Knowing that there were already tensions between the Stevens Square residents and PCNF, the SSCO board saw the organizational models study as a method of examining the benefits and liabilities of an on-going partnership, and perhaps of arriving at consensus about how to proceed in the future.

That goal changed dramatically when the PCNF board of directors refused to participate in the study. Although PCNF had agreed to support the organizational models project and in fact was obligated to do so by the terms of a Minneapolis Foundation grant, the board of directors of PCNF felt that: “Creating a more comprehensive partnership with any one neighborhood organization would compromise our flexibility to pursue our faith-based mission and would restrict our need to work with a variety of partners in order to accomplish our goals.” 1 In a subsequent phone conversation, the Executive Director of the foundation reiterated that the board members of PCNF did not want to participate in any personal interviews about the partnership with SSCO, stating that they were “too busy and have too much on their plates.” PCNF’s refusal to participate in the organizational models research, although disappointing, ultimately proved to be an instructive, and perhaps all too typical, example of how faith-based organizations and grassroots community organizations often operate with very different values, particularly in regard to the process of working with neighborhoods.

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1 Letter from Linda Satorius, Executive Director PCNF, to Janet Whitmore, SSCO. 28 February 2001.
In redefining the project scope without PCNF’s participation, SSCO examined a variety of resources, projects, and theoretical models that may offer useful direction for the development of partnership models between community organizations and faith-based organizations. The questions that were originally posed remained a part of the research.

- How do faith-based organizations work with community organizations?
- Does a faith-based mission interfere with the organization’s ability to work with non-faith-based organizations and individuals?
- What models for partnership work best?
- Are there particular circumstances in which certain models work better than others?

**Basic Question Must be Asked**

PCNF’s refusal to participate in the organizational models study gave rise to an even more basic question: Can a faith-based organization that subscribes to a pyramidal decision-making hierarchy function in a community that subscribes to a grassroots decision-making process? These two decision-making processes represent opposite assumptions about how community decisions are made, and about who makes them.

For example, SSCO’s belief that PCNF was willing to examine the parameters of the partnership was based on the assumption that the existing project-based cooperation between the two organizations indicated a commitment to working with the community. In fact, it indicated only a commitment to working on a specific project. Similarly, the foundation board’s perception that decisions are best made by a small group of individuals, seems to conflict with the grassroots decision-making process required by the neighborhood organization. PCNF perceived the neighborhood’s request that it be consulted about proposed projects in the community as interference in private transactions. Ultimately, the PCNF board’s unwillingness to discuss these questions effectively eliminated the possibility of coming to a mutually acceptable resolution to the dilemma.

There are two caveats that must be noted here. First, the question of whether the pyramidal decision-making structure is an insurmountable obstacle to the grassroots process relates specifically to the organizational hierarchy of the local faith-based entity. It does not refer to the overall structure of the denomination. For example, although the Catholic Church is clearly a pyramidal hierarchy, this does not mean that local Catholic organizations are incapable of working with grassroots community processes. In fact, certain Catholic organizations pioneered very effective models for working in a grassroots context. Second, the faith-based organizations that were examined in this brief study were all Christian. Whether or not the same issues would arise in religions where centralized authority is less valued is unknown.

**II. Exploring Faith-based Models for Community Action**

Faith-based organizations working on community issues are well established throughout the US. Both the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church have extensive social
services networks with long histories of addressing social problems and concerns. Other
religious denominations have smaller, although no less effective nationwide initiatives as
well. The Episcopal Church of America and the Baptist Church in particular are quite
active in addressing social concerns as a part of their spiritual practice. In addition, there
are a number of organizations that have evolved from faith-based origins into national
networks of non-profit corporations working with communities. This would include such
groups as Common Bond and Building Healthier Communities, both of which emerged
from a Catholic context; or the Industrial Area Foundation which grew from the labor
movement in 1930s Chicago into a national network of community and faith-based
organizations working towards social change. These networks are well established, and
most are affiliated with a particular religious denomination. Although such faith-based
networks offer many models for working in communities, they are most often structured
with the faith-based group initiating, planning and implementing projects without
significant involvement from the community. Even when there is an effort to involve
community members in the program development process, the decision-making authority
remains with the established, faith-based hierarchy. For more information about these
organizations, please see the Resource List at the end of this report.

Turning to the more specific focus of the organizational and structural relationship
between faith-based organizations and community organizations, there is much less
scholarly research available. One of the few recent studies in this field is based on the
Lilly Endowment initiative to create partnerships between religious organizations and
community organizations. In 1989, the Lilly Endowment announced the Religious
Institutions as Partners in Community-Based Development Program as a national
demonstration project. The program was designed to:

- Stimulate greater involvement of religious institutions in community revitalization
- Create new religious-community partnerships
- Strengthen community ministries
- Attract new sources of funding for such initiatives

The program began providing grants and technical assistance to both religious
organizations and to partnerships between faith-based and community organizations in
1989. The primary focus of the Lilly program, however, is on faith-based organizations’
potential for community involvement rather than on the structural dynamics of partnering
with community organizations. At the request of the Lilly Endowment Program,
Rainbow Research, Inc. of Minneapolis conducted an evaluation of the partnerships
formed under its new program. Results indicate that there are five characteristics that
contribute to a successful partnership between faith-based and community-based
organizations. Those characteristics are:

- Partners have a clear, common vision of the partnership and the development goals
  that is firmly rooted in shared values.

2 Rainbow Research, Inc. Religious Institutions as Partners in Community Based Development: Findings
from Year One of the Lilly Endowment Program, Minneapolis 1991.
There is a high level of trust and respect between the partners; an empowering and mutually supportive relationship exists.

Strengths of each partner are recognized and appreciated and tasks are effectively divided between them.

The partnership structure promotes inclusiveness and has bridged ecumenical, racial, cultural, geographic or economic differences.

Volunteers have multiple ways to serve the project, and committee structures encourage participation, are fair and productive.3

It must be understood, however, that the 28 organizations involved in the Lilly Endowment Program were primarily faith-based in origin, even when they were functioning as community-based organizations. Less than half of the participating organizations (12 out of 28) were primarily secular in defining their mission. The rest were either closely tied to a religious institution or directly affiliated with one.4 As Rainbow Research’s 1994 report notes:

“The Program showed how difficult it can be to draw the line between “religious” and “community-based” organizations. Many organizations in the Program that consider themselves “community-based” have extensive involvement by religious institutions. They commonly originated in church basements. Nearly all involved individuals, both clergy and laity, are acting on religious convictions. As one participant said, it’s important to recognize the ‘church latent’—individuals and informal groups of religiously motivated people—as well as the ‘church manifest’—the official, institutional church.”5

Based on the results of the Lilly Endowment Program, it is clear that faith-based organizations can and do work very effectively in addressing social concerns within communities. Rainbow Research, Inc. identified five keys to building successful partnerships with religious institutions.6

1. Establish a foundation of shared values and goals, and move forward from there into project planning.
2. Cultivate multi-level involvement among congregants and pastors.
3. Communicate frequently so that all partners feel fully informed and included.
4. Make it a partnership between people as well as between institutions.
5. Where some partners lack necessary knowledge or expertise, provide opportunities for them to acquire it.

3 Rainbow Research, Inc. Religious Institutions as Partners in Community Based Development: Findings from Year One of the Lilly Endowment Program, Minneapolis 1991. 63-64.
5 Ibid. 72.
6 Ibid. 74.
The first point—establishing a foundation of shared values and goals—is the most challenging for community organizations that do not have a homogenous constituency. Urban neighborhoods in particular tend to include a broad cross-section of the population with a wide range of religious, ethical and cultural value systems. The creation of shared values may well be an unrealistic expectation in this context.

III. Shared values and shared visions

While the creation of shared values may not be a feasible goal for partnerships between faith-based organizations and community organizations, it is realistic to expect that a shared vision can be developed. The distinction is an important one: shared values imply that a group subscribes to a common set of moral, ethical and spiritual beliefs that govern conduct and life choices. Religious organizations of all types clearly fit this description.

A shared vision does not require such intense commonality. It does require that individuals with differing value systems agree to work together to create a future for their community. Individuals must agree that they will abide by the consensus that is achieved through a process of discussion, evaluation and collective decision-making. Creating a shared vision is an inherently democratic and grassroots process. It is rarely an efficient process, but it is one of the most effective for developing plans that are broadly supported within the community, and that have a realistic chance of being implemented. Perhaps most importantly, the development of a shared vision builds community by welcoming a wide variety of stakeholders into the process.

Perceptions Differ Dramatically

In researching examples of faith-based organizations working with community organizations, one of the most frequent observations is that there is a significant difference in the perception of the relationship. A particularly dramatic example of this is the relationship between Urban Ventures, Inc. and the Central and Phillips neighborhood organizations in south Minneapolis.

The stated mission of Urban Ventures is to: 1. Create meaningful work opportunities; 2. Strengthen families; and 3. Develop youth leadership. These goals are to be accomplished within a Christian context, although the staff person who was interviewed about the organization would not specify whether Urban Ventures was affiliated with any particular Christian denomination. Further research suggested that this is an independent organization that broke away from a mainstream Methodist church as a result of disagreements over how to operate the program.

Located within a poor, inner city neighborhood, Urban Ventures has identified a 2-5 block ‘opportunity zone’ around its headquarters building where it is now in the process of establishing the Colin Powell Youth Leadership Center, a $16 million community center. The new center will be home to Urban Ventures youth programs including the Urban Stars Athletic Club, a soccer and basketball program for 10-15 year old boys, and

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7 Interview with N. Hable of Urban Ventures, March 2001.
the Learning Lab which is an after-school program operated in conjunction with the Minneapolis Public Schools.

All of these programs appear to offer real opportunities for urban youth as well as a focal point for the community at large. It would seem almost churlish to denigrate the value of Urban Ventures role in maintaining community stability, and yet that is precisely what neighborhood residents and organizers have indicated. While Urban Ventures staff describe their relationship with the surrounding communities as “very positive”, a “good partnership, a former neighborhood organizer characterizes it as “patriarchal” and states that “building a relationship with the community isn’t a goal for Urban Ventures.”

Other residents articulate discomfort with the emphasis on public Christian prayer at all events, and feel that the exclusively Christian coaches for the athletic teams tend to promote their religious beliefs too intensely. In contrast, the Urban Ventures staff seems entirely unaware of this criticism, perhaps because neighborhood parents would rather tolerate unwanted religious instruction than deny their children an opportunity to participate in sports.

The Urban Ventures example highlights the dilemma of shared values and shared visions. There is clearly a positive exchange occurring when the community residents utilize Urban Ventures’ programs, and to the extent that this exchange represents a shared vision for the community, it works. What doesn’t work in this case arises from Urban Ventures’ lack of self-awareness in terms of how it is perceived in the neighborhood. Not only does the organization seem unaware that the fundamental Christian values that it promotes may not be acceptable to all residents, but there is no indication that community input is ever seriously considered in the decision-making process regarding neighborhood programs and projects. Similarly, Urban Ventures staff members maintain that the organization “has made a commitment to staying in the neighborhood,” but seem to have no understanding that ‘staying in the neighborhood’ benefits Urban Ventures as much as it does the community. As long as the community does not object vociferously to Urban Ventures religious instruction and top-down decision-making processes, it will continue to operate without consulting anyone outside of its own hierarchy. Programs will continue to be imposed on a community that is already stressed by economic and societal pressures.

Doing Good Works in the Community

Many faith-based organizations are involved in community development work because it is a part of their religious doctrine. In the Christian examples examined for this study, the participants definitively stated that ‘helping less fortunate people’ is an important motivation for undertaking community-based programs. As one individual put it: “We’re not imposing our faith on people. We want to be of service.” The issue is not one of proselytizing, but of acting on the Christian beliefs that the individuals involved hold dear. All too often, however, the desire to ‘help out’ becomes focused on the personal
needs of the ‘helpers’ to the detriment of those who are being helped. The same individual who articulated the desire to serve so eloquently also stated that “people need a spiritual base”, and that she was more than pleased to discuss spiritual matters with participants in the community programs.11

One organization that is addressing this issue straightforwardly is the Minneapolis Council of Churches. Through its Urban Immersion Service Retreat program, the Council hopes to “help churches/faith groups becomes more equipped to get involved in the needs within their community.”12 The key to the success of this program is that the volunteers who sign up to work with communities are required to participate in a Pre-Service Training session before they set foot in the neighborhood. The Council’s brochure puts it succinctly: “Too often groups volunteer at service sites without a basic understanding of why or who they are helping. This can often lead to an unrealistic sense of accomplishment (good or bad). It can also foster disrespectful attitudes in the service groups.”13 To counteract that ‘disrespectful attitude’, the Council staff require that volunteers discuss why they are participating in the program, why people are in need of help, and how they might best serve those who are in need. This approach helps eliminate some of the ego-driven motivations that will ultimately sabotage real service, and it also screens out individuals who genuinely may not be able to function effectively in a distressed neighborhood.

IV. Conclusion: Is Partnership Possible?

The relationship between faith-based organizations and community organizations is clearly problematic, and the central issue involves decision-making authority and shared visions. Both organizations must acknowledge that they are unlikely to share a common value system, but that it is nonetheless possible to share a vision for the community. Arthur Himmelman’s article on Communities Working collaboratively for a Change identifies a continuum of collaboration that is particularly instructive.14 He describes four stages on the path to collaborative empowerment.

1. Networking: Sharing information for mutual benefit. Little trust is required.
2. Coordination: Networking plus a willingness to alter activities for a common purpose.
3. Cooperation: Networking plus coordination plus sharing resources such as office space, staff and funding. Trust is required. Respect is required.
4. Collaboration: Networking plus coordination plus cooperation plus a willingness to enhance the capacity of another organization for a common purpose. In other words, this is power sharing. Trust must be very high. Risks, responsibilities and rewards are all shared. Individuals and organizations that are egocentric will not be able to collaborate.

11 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
Himmelman’s continuum for collaborative empowerment provides a road map for all types of organizations hoping to work as partners. It offers benchmarks to determine what stage the partnership is in, and indicates what needs to occur in order to move to the next level. This is not a simple process. It is not about logistics or grant-writing or hiring a program coordinator. It is about relationships between individuals who hope to collaborate—as staff members, board members and community stakeholders.

Next Steps

The relationship between SSCO and PCNF can only be described as a minimal networking partnership at this time. Information sharing does occur, but it is not consistent or formalized and a lot of information that is relevant to a strong working relationship does not get conveyed. Nor is there a significant level of trust. By Himmelman’s definition, the existing relationship would barely register on the continuum for collaborative empowerment.

Next steps for SSCO to consider are:

1. **Recognize and acknowledge the current situation.** The first step for SSCO is to recognize that sharing information is all that can be expected from PCNF in the immediate future. However, SSCO must also acknowledge that, to date, even information sharing has not always been for the mutual benefit of the organizations or the community. In the potentially adversarial context that has developed with PCNF, it is crucial that SSCO be both attentive and objective in assessing any information provided by PCNF. An unwarranted extension of trust will only result in anger, frustration and the creation of ever-greater hurdles for the community and SSCO to overcome in the future.

   Equally important is the acknowledgement that SSCO and PCNF do not possess a shared vision of the community. PCNF has clearly stated that “creating a partnership with any one neighborhood organization would compromise our flexibility to pursue our faith-based mission”. This appears to be the core of the conflict between PCNF and the community. Acknowledging and understanding that there is no shared vision—and perhaps not even a commitment to the self-identified best interests of the community—will allow SSCO to enter a relationship with PCNF without illusions. This provides an honest base for beginning to establish trust.

2. **Gradually build trust.** A second step for SSCO to consider is the gradual building of increased trust with PCNF. Obviously, this will take a diplomatic combination of patience and firmness. SSCO must always remember that its primary obligation is to the community. Tactful discussions with PCNF representatives can facilitate increased honesty and openness between the organizations, but SSCO must monitor this carefully until there is consensus that PCNF is genuinely committed to a networking partnership.

The following steps should be considered:
a) **Identify specific benchmarks for trust.** SSCO must identify specific benchmarks by which it will judge what level of trust has been achieved. For example, one benchmark might be whether or not PCNF representatives meet commitments about providing information on a timely basis? A next level might be whether or not PCNF is willing to initiate information sharing.

b) **Establish a schedule for measuring trust.** Although it may sound impossible to measure something as intangible as trust, SSCO should establish a time frame for evaluating the results of its identified benchmarks: six months would be a minimum amount of time. Regular discussions of the benchmarks should be included on the agenda for the board meetings or committee meetings as appropriate. The person responsible for recording the meeting minutes should maintain a running account of how the community and SSCO board members perceive the relationship. No doubt this will reflect the normal fluctuations of human nature, but it is also probable that a clear trend will emerge at the end of six months or more.

c) **Respond in kind.** Identifying these benchmarks will allow SSCO to determine how quickly trust is being developed between the two organizations. It offers a model for maintaining a dispassionate distance so that trust is not offered before it is justified, and conversely, it prevents an unnecessarily harsh model for establishing trust. In exchange, SSCO must meet the same trust obligations that it identifies as benchmarks for evaluating PCNF. Given the damage that has been done to the relationship between the two organizations, no one should expect genuine trust to develop quickly.

3. **Ask to move to the next level of trust.** Once an increased level of trust is re-established, SSCO will want to ask to move the relationship to the next level of collaborative empowerment. One possibility would be a request that PCNF board members attend the Minneapolis Council of Churches Urban Immersion Service Retreat program. Presumably this would be acceptable to PCNF as a faith-based initiative designed to assist in community-based efforts. SSCO’s goal in this would be to encourage PCNF to gain a deeper understanding of working with communities, and to benefit from an ‘outside expert’ who teaches respect and sensitivity in a faith-based context. Be prepared to respond to a comparable request from PCNF.

This step in the process will serve as yet another benchmark for evaluating the relationship. It is possible, and even probable, that the SSCO/PCNF relationship will never evolve past the networking phase on Himmelman’s continuum. The coordination phase that would naturally emerge from the networking phase demands both trust and a willingness to alter activities for a common purpose. Based on past history, it seems unlikely that PCNF will be willing to alter their activities in response to the Stevens Square community needs. SSCO should not be disappointed with this, but strive to maintain the best networking partnership possible for the benefit of the community.

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Appendix: Resource List

There are numerous sources of information about faith-based organizations working with communities. This is a selection of those that seem to have the sincerest concern for involving the community stakeholders in the process.

Arthur Himmelman: www.dsc.org

Building Healthier Communities: www.bhconline.org

Catholic Campaign for Human Development: www.nccbuscc.org

Center for Community Change: www.commchange.org

Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches: www.gmcc.org

Industrial Area Foundation: www.tresser.com/IAF

The Nehemiah Community Development Corporation: www.nehemiah.org

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