Faith into Practice: An Exploration into the Board Development Practices of Faith-Based Organizations

By

Pamela Leland, PhD
University of Delaware

Contact information:

c/o Nonprofit Community Resource Center
University of Delaware
100 West 10th Street, Suite 812
Wilmington, DE 19801
(302) 573-4494
Fax: (302) 573-4440
pleland@udel.edu
Abstract

The research that is being presented here (in incomplete and preliminary form) reports on initial findings from a larger research effort that explores issues of governance in faith-based human service organizations. This first part concerns matters of board development, specifically the practices of recruitment, selection, orientation, training and self-assessment. The larger initiative will cover all matters of governance including board structure and composition, board development, policies and operations, decision-making and leadership.

The paper presents information regarding the board development practices of faith-based organizations. The sample pool is comprised of a dozen human service faith-based organizations selected through a convenience method. They represent two of the types of faith-based organizations identified by The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy: local religiously-affiliated nonprofits and national faith-based service organizations. Data is being collected through personal interviews with executive directors and examination of agency publications. While, research is currently limited to information received from the executive director, eventually the research will be informed by data received from members of the respective boards of directors.

This first-stage research explores 3 hypotheses. The first is that faith-based boards of directors practice board development in a manner that explicitly reflects and incorporates the values of each organization’s particular faith orientation. A second hypothesis is that faith-based boards of directors articulate the effectiveness of their own governance in a manner that explicitly incorporates a faith dimension. The third hypothesis is that as organizations become larger and more established, there is a greater distance between board development practices and an explicit incorporation and representation of the faith tradition.

Information to be gathered to explore these three hypotheses include:

- Manner and means through which board members’ qualifications, roles and responsibilities are articulated
- Policies and processes to identify, recruit and select board members, including the means by which one’s faith experience is incorporated into the recruitment and selection process
- Methods and means of orientation and training, including an examination of materials and curriculum that is included in these activities and programs
- Manner and means through which these faith-based organization boards understand, articulate and measure their own effectiveness
- Organizational “demographics,” i.e., age, budget size, affiliation, etc.
Introduction to the Paper and Project

This project began with a personal interest, the immediate questions that emerged from a curious and cynical mind, and a desire to determine if some resulting “logical conclusions” would be affirmed or disproved.

First there was an interest in faith-based social service organizations. More specifically there was an interest in how matters of faith shaped the management and operations of such organizations.¹

Second there were those pesky questions arising from the personal interest: What does it mean for a social service organization to be faith-based? How would we know an organization is faith-based? How and where is faith found in a faith-based organization? How is it expressed in the structure? In the programs that are offered? In the way that decisions are made? In who sits on the board? In terms of who is hired? In how resources are allocated? In how staff members are evaluated and assessed? And whose faith? Is it one faith or many faiths? Can people of many faiths work together in a faith-based organization? Are all faiths welcomed?

These questions quickly became overwhelming! How to begin? Where to begin?

I decided to begin at the top. Published literature and peoples’ widespread experience repeatedly suggest the critical role that boards and executive management play in the culture and operations of any organization. An organization’s way of being is said to begin, rest and end under the influence of the leadership of the organization. The long-term vision for this research project is to explore these questions in a manner that includes both board and staff leadership. However, one has to start somewhere; I decided to start with the governing board. In starting at the board level, I began with questions related to board development, i.e., the practices of

¹ While there is also a related interest in the management and operations of faith communities (i.e., congregations, synagogues, temples, etc.), these kinds of entities were seen as different and distinct from the primary question. Therefore, this study is restricted to human service or social service delivery organizations.
recruitment, training and assessment that lead to and result in board composition and board operations.

To repeat: the over-arching research question is how matters of faith shape the management and operations of faith-based social service organizations. The source of the answer rests in the experiences and practices at the board and executive leadership level. With the board as the doorway into answering the research question, there were some expectations (or hypotheses, if you prefer) as to how boards in faith-based organizations would form and operate in their roles as organizational leaders:

- First is that faith-based boards of directors would practice board development in a manner that explicitly reflects and incorporates the values of each organization’s particular faith orientation, i.e., they would recruit, orient and train board members with faith in mind.
- Second is that faith-based boards of directors would articulate the effectiveness of their own governance in a manner that explicitly incorporates a faith dimension.
- Third is that as organizations become larger and more established, there would be a greater distance between board development practices and an explicit incorporation and representation of the faith tradition, i.e., that as organizations grow, the faith component would diminish in importance.

Methodology

As noted above, this project is (and has been) framed as an exploration of and initial step into a larger research effort on the practice of governance and leadership in faith-based social service organizations. As originally planned, this portion of the project is investigating board
development practices in 12 local faith-based social service organizations that fall within two
types of faith-based organizations identified by The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare
Policy: local religiously-affiliated nonprofits and national faith-based service organizations.
Information is being gathered through personal interviews with the chief staff person in each
organization.

As the survey questions were developed, the scope broadened beyond the simple
practices related to recruitment, training, retention and assessment. Additional questions were
added regarding the structure of the board, the respondents’ view of effective governance (in
general) and an initial assessment of his or her own board’s effectiveness. The interviews remain,
however, in the context of initial and exploratory.

The Sample. A convenience method was used to create the list of potential respondents.
Through the author’s self knowledge and solicitation from individuals knowledgeable about
local human services, a list of 28 faith-based organizations headquartered in the county was
generated. At least one of these has since been found to not be a faith-based organization.2 The
first 12 organizations to agree to an interview will be included in this phase of the research. In
this list of 12, there was an attempt to include organizations from Protestant, Catholic and Jewish
traditions. No other faith traditions are known to be represented in the list of 27. A list of data
elements are provided in Attachment 1.

Progress-to-Date. Only 5 interviews have been successfully completed as of March 23,
2005. After completing the interviews with these 5 organizations, one has been set aside. This
executive director, upon completion of the interview, decided that his was [paraphrased] not
really a faith-based social service organization but a social service organization with a history

---

2 The national organization has adopted a specific policy naming itself (and all their affiliates) as a “secular”
one has been set aside. This organization. The faith-based status of all other organizations on the list has not been confirmed because several
organizations are not listed in the phone directory and/or contact has not yet been made with a real person.
of religious group involvement. Though this organization will not be included in the sample, it will be discussed below because of relevant research-related data.

Interviews continue to be scheduled with the intent of meeting the stated goal of 12 respondents. Data received thus far and their implications are discussed in the next section.

Discussion and Analysis

As noted above, during the interview process four of the five organizations were found to be faith-based organizations; the fifth organization was deemed to be a secular organization. Information from this organization will be discussed separately below. A summary list of data is included in Attachment 2.

The four faith-based organizations vary by size, age and field of activity. One is a small 70-year old youth-serving organization with 4 full-time employees and a budget of approximately $500,000. Another is an organization that has provided housing for low-income families for 19 years. It has a budget of approximately $3.2 million with 11 full-time employees. Two of the 4 can be considered general social/human service organizations, providing a range of programs. However, these organizations are dramatically different—one is 45 years old and has a budget of $600,000 with 5 full-time employees; the other is more than 100 years old with a budget of $12 million and 130 full-time employees. Three of the four organizations are part of a larger national or international organization.

In terms of board structure and operations, there were areas of some consistency. Three of the four organizations have a potential board size of 15-20 members; the fourth organization can have up to 42 members. None, however, currently has a board that is fully stocked. Similarly, 3 of four boards met monthly, measured as 10-11 times a year. The smallest organization had a
board that met only 5 times a year. All four organizations had board terms of 2-3 years, with 3 of the 4 organizations imposing term limits for a possible 6 years of service.

When asked to describe the composition of their (respective) boards, the chief executives offered two types of responses. Two executives described the composition in terms of occupation and diversity (race, gender, income). The other two other executives described their boards in terms of their relationship to their faith tradition. One indicated that the board members represented their various sponsoring congregations; the other described the composition as “lay leaders” who are involved in ministry to young people. In terms of religious affiliation, two were exclusively of one religion or denomination … though both respondents indicated that this was not intentional. One board was a mix of Protestant and Catholic individuals. The final board included Protestants, Catholics and a single Jew.

The percentage of men on these boards ranged from half to 79%. The percentage of persons of color ranged between 17-28%. The estimated percentage of board members from professional occupations ranged between 40-80%. When asked to measure the level of “professional or corporate culture” on the board on a 5-point scale, the four executives indicated an average of 3.1 (with 5 being “very corporate”). Only 2 of the organizations had any representation from their respective client populations; of these two, one had only 1 person among 18 board members.

For the most part, these boards use a committee to handle board recruitment and nomination processes. Three of the four use either the Nominating Committee or the Executive Committee. The fourth organization has a defunct Nominating Committee so board development issues are handled by the board president and the CEO. Three of the four organizations bring on
new board members once a year during an annual meeting. One organization admits board members throughout the year.

None of the organizations use a specific assessment tool to determine board needs. Two of the four do have written board member job descriptions; in both cases, these are provided by their national office. None of the four use any kind of written annual agreement with board members as to roles, responsibilities and/or financial commitments. None hold regular board retreats. None do any kind of annual board self-assessment. While 3 of the four hold some kind of orientation for new board members, these are brief sessions (30 minutes to an hour) in which a board manual is distributed and reviewed.

None have formal (written or specific) screening criteria for board membership. None use an established list of questions when discussing possible membership with a prospective board member. There was a general agreement that the key screening criteria were agreement with the mission and an interest in the work of the organization. One executive acknowledged the difficulty in finding board members and said they didn’t have the luxury of being “selective.” They don’t screen out people but are usually begging people to say yes to their invitation. Three of the four executives indicated that they were very involved in the recruitment process.

When asked about board recruitment and selection processes as practiced in a faith-based context, there was amazing similarity in the lack of any intentional activities. All four indicated that they do pray at board meetings—some combination of opening prayers, closing prayers and devotionals. However, three of the four do not look for any specific religious characteristics in prospective board members. For the fourth organization, they need representatives from sponsoring congregations.
None ask prospective board members about faith in general. None ask them to speak about their faith or their faith journey. Three of the four do not ask about church membership or church activities. None distribute a statement of faith (except as it may be embodied in the mission statement). None do any kind of training related to their faith tradition. None are asked to sign a statement of faith, though the board members from one organization are asked to individually sign an affiliate agreement with the national organization every two years. There is doctrinal language in this affiliate agreement.

This is not to say, however, that issues of faith are not necessarily addressed; the respondents indicated that these simply were not explicitly addressed. Three of the four organizations draw new board members from their own volunteers or faith community networks, suggesting that in most cases, prospective board members are known to them. Also, all of the respondents indicated that the faith component was in the mission statement, or in the printed materials that were given to prospective or new board members, or in the video that is shown in orientation. The respondents, therefore, assumed people understood the faith dimensions. There was also agreement that if prospective board members raised questions or offered personal information regarding their faith or beliefs, that this was fine—even good. But none sought out this information; none asked about it. There was a general attitude of “this is who we are, do you want to join us” versus a process of mutual discernment to determine if it would be a compatible match where matters of faith were concerned. The result is that two of the four executives acknowledged that they had board members who expressed a lack of belief or appeared to have “no faith.”

Respondents were asked to describe or discuss (in a preliminary fashion) how matters of faith were evident or expressed at board meetings. No patterns emerged in the answers received
thus far. One respondent indicated that it was evident in the way the work of the organization was explained to others. He indicated that board members often talked about the Biblical duty to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. There was also an often-expressed sense of duty to give back to those less fortunate.

Another respondent indicated that it was evident in the kinds of financial decisions that were made, reporting that in the past, they had entered into some new initiatives “on faith,” trusting that the necessary funds would be found. A third respondent indicated that the recent scandals within the Catholic Church had fostered a great deal of discussion within the board as to the roles and responsibilities they had in ensuring the safety of young people in their care. He reported that the board often explored the meaning of how to serve young people in Jesus’ name.

Respondents were asked their opinion as to what makes a good board member. Interestingly none responded with information specific to matters of faith. While several expressed the need for a strong commitment to “the mission,” in general the executives more frequently mentioned behavioral characteristics. For example, they identified the following: taking initiative, being proactive on behalf of the organization, being an advocate for the organization in the community, using skills and resources for the organization, thinking outside the box, and being willing to get their hands dirty (though not micro-managing). One respondent said a good board member brought at least of two of the following: time, talent or treasure.

When asked what characterized a good board (i.e., the collective group), again, none responded with qualities that reflected a faith component. Characteristics that were listed included: maintaining participation and involvement, keeping focused on broad mission and vision, moving the organization forward, paying attention to money and finances, keeping
attention on governance and trusting staff to do the work. When asked to assess their board’s performance on a 5-point scale (with 5 as superior), the average was 3.4.

The “non” FBO. As indicated earlier, one of the 5 executives interviewed for this project asserted that his was not a faith-based organization. This is an intriguing response for several reasons. First, it was founded by a coalition of local churches; these churches remain connected to the organization through funding and other kinds of contributions (including volunteers). Second, at least some members of the larger community believe this to be a faith-based organization, i.e., it showed up on several lists of faith-based agencies. Third, the name of the organization includes a Biblical reference, thus reinforcing its public image as a faith-based entity.

When the organization’s status as a faith-based organization was raised, the respondent was asked to define a faith-based organization. He indicated it was one that refused public funds and held religious services. When it was clarified that one could be a faith-based organization and still do those things, the respondent was incredulous. Nonetheless, the respondent further indicated that (1) the original sponsoring churches have no governance connection to the organization, and (2) there is no religious content at board meetings, i.e., they do not pray. So it would appear that, indeed, this organization is not faith-based at least as currently defined in this research project.

The resulting question, however, is how important is self-identification in a definition of a faith-based organization? The community seems to put this organization in that category. This is likely due to its known history in the community and its name. However, it may also be due to the reputation of the executive director who is known as someone who has a strong faith and speaks of his job as a “calling by God.” The executive talked about how all of the staff “believe
that God holds this place in the palm of His hands.” He related a recent occurrence that everyone interpreted as affirming this: there was a large snow storm that led to a need for some plowing. The agency has no equipment for plowing. A man drove up in a truck and said he would plow for $50. Without knowing how it would be paid for, the staff member on duty agreed. While the man was plowing, a woman arrived at the door of the facility with her son. The woman directed her son to donate $50.00 which he had won gambling with his friends. The executive and staff claimed this as evidence of God’s work and presence. *Is this a faith-based organization or not?*

**Conclusions and Next Steps**

With only 5 completed interviewed, it is too early to draw any kind of conclusions. There are, however, some comments and questions that have already emerged:

- First, I have been surprised to find the lack of any intention during the processes of recruitment, selection, and orientation to uncover or ascertain matters of faith within prospective board members. The resulting question, however, is whether this is a reflection of inattention to dimensions of faith or simply inattention to issues of board development? Given there is little or no use of elements that are typically considered part of board development “best practices” (i.e., systematic assessment of board needs, use of job descriptions, letters of agreement, annual self-assessment, board retreats, etc.), it may simply be the latter. Yet all four of the respondents indicated that they did not ask people faith-related questions during recruitment meetings and discussions.

- Second, there is the now-even-more-confusing question regarding the definition of a faith-based organization. If the organization claims to be faith-based but can offer few indicators of how faith shapes their board operations, is it truly faith-based? Does it
matter that board members don’t have to believe or even agree with some basic doctrinal statements—regardless of which doctrines? On the flip side, is it enough to have a name that raises some religious meaning and the community thinks that an organization as faith-based? How much does “self-identification” as a faith-based organization count?

- Third, what kind(s) of (future) methodology will produce the data needed to answer the over-arching question of how matters of faith shape the management and operations of organizations that are defined or known as faith-based? While the effort being discussed here is recognized as a first step into the larger project, the complexities of capturing relevant information are already evident. Ensuring accurate and reliable data collection will be critical.

As has been noted, this is a work-in-progress. Additional interviews are scheduled and data continues to be gathered. Your thoughts, comments, suggestions would be appreciated!!

References


Brinckerhoff, Peter C. 1999. Faith-Based Management: Leading organizations that are based on more than just mission. New York: Wiley and Sons, Inc.


**Web-Site Resources**

The Faith and Service Technical Education Network (FASTEN), [www.fastennetwork.org](http://www.fastennetwork.org)

Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy (The Roundtable), [www.religionandsocialpolicy.org](http://www.religionandsocialpolicy.org)
ATTACHMENT 1: Survey Elements

- Age of this organization/affiliate
- Part of a national affiliation
- Age of national organization
- Size of budget
- Number of full-time employees
- Number of part-time employees
- Number of regular volunteers (other than board members)
- Presence and role of an advisory board
- Potential size of the board
- Current number on board
- Frequency of board meetings
- Board term
- Term limits
- Descriptive composition of your board
- Number of men/women
- Number of people of color (either black, Hispanic, Asian, etc)
- Perceived level of “professional or corporate” culture
- Percentage of professionals, e.g., lawyers, financial, corporate types
- Percentage individuals who don't hold paid jobs, i.e., are full-time community volunteers
- Percentage representation of client population
- Committee that handles board recruitment
- Timeline for nomination/election process
- Use of recruitment assessment tool or matrix
- Presence of board member job description
- Use of written annual agreements with individual board members that details their roles, contributions
- Source of new board members
- Recruitment process
- Use of application form
- Screening criteria for board members
- Orientation activities
- Use of board retreats
- Board self-assessment processes
- Use of prayer and/or devotionals at board meetings
- Board selection criteria related to religious practices, membership, activity/participation
- Presence of statement of faith
- Training in faith issues
- Role of faith in informing the way the board operates
- Opinion as to what makes an effective board member
- Opinion as to what makes an effective board (as a whole)
- Overall assessment of board performance
## ATTACHMENT 2: Summary Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>FBOs (n=4)</th>
<th>Non FBO (n=1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of this organization/affiliate</td>
<td>Between 19 and 111 years old, with average age of 61 years</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of a national affiliation</td>
<td>3 of 4 are part of national organization</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of national organization</td>
<td>Between 8 and 140 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of budget</td>
<td>Between $500,000 - $ 12 million</td>
<td>$407,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of full-time employees</td>
<td>From 4 to 130</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of part-time employees</td>
<td>Between 1 and 45</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of regular volunteers (other than board members)</td>
<td>From 120 to thousands</td>
<td>100-150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence and role of an advisory board</td>
<td>3 of four do not have an advisory board</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential size of the board</td>
<td>Between 15 and 42</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current number on board</td>
<td>Between 12 and 33</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: No one had a full board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of board meetings</td>
<td>3 met monthly (10-11 times a year); one met 5 times a year</td>
<td>6 times a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board term</td>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term limits</td>
<td>2-3 terms; one had no term limits Note: each org upheld term limits “now”</td>
<td>No term limits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual percentage of men on the board</td>
<td>Between 50-79% with average of 61%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual percentage of people of color (either black, Hispanic, Asian, etc)</td>
<td>Between 17 – 28% with average of 20%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived level of “professional or corporate” culture</td>
<td>3.1 on a 5 point scale</td>
<td>4 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated percentage of professionals, e.g., lawyers, financial, corporate types</td>
<td>Between 40 – 80% with average of 64%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated percentage individuals who don’t hold paid jobs, i.e., are full-time</td>
<td>Between 7.5 – 40% with average of 17%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community volunteers</td>
<td>Percentage representation of client population</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Only 2 orgs included representation—one at less than 1% and one at 40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different faiths represented</td>
<td>A mixed response—Either Protestant or Catholic tho’ one with no faith All one denomination All one denomination but not by design Mix of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish (1)</td>
<td>Either Protestant or Catholic; one non-believer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee that handles board recruitment</td>
<td>2 use Nominating Committee 1 uses Executive Committee 1 uses Board Chair and CEO because Nominating Committee is defunct</td>
<td>Board Chair and director because Membership Committee has been inactive for 8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline for nomination/election process</td>
<td>3 of 4 bring on new members one time a year; one can bring on anytime</td>
<td>One time a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of recruitment assessment tool or matrix</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of board member job description</td>
<td>2 of 4 use something from national office; the other 2 do not have one</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of written annual agreements with individual board members that details their roles, contributions</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of new board members</td>
<td>Referrals; self-initiated 3 of 4 reported that prospects more frequently from board members</td>
<td>Referral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of application form</td>
<td>2 of 4 use an application form</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screening criteria for board members</td>
<td>No one uses formal criteria</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation activities</td>
<td>3 of four hold some kind of orientation session</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of board retreats</td>
<td>None regularly hold board retreats</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board self-assessment processes</td>
<td>None conduct routine self-assessment</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of prayer and/or devotionals at board meetings</td>
<td>All four use combination of opening and/or closing prayer and/or devotional</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In recruiting, are there specific religious characteristics you look for?</td>
<td>3 of 4 said no; one needs denominational representation</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you ask about</td>
<td>1 of 4 asks</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership?</td>
<td>1 of 4 asks</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you ask about level of religious participation?</td>
<td>None of the four ask</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you ask about faith and/or faith journey?</td>
<td>None of the four distribute</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive a statement of faith</td>
<td>In only one org; there is a national affiliate agreement (that includes a statement of belief) that individuals have to sign every 2 years</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign a statement of faith</td>
<td>None provide training though 2 of the 4 have published materials from the national office if someone wants information</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training in faith issues</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall assessment of board performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>