

Editorial

Introduction of the Special Issue “Religion, Welfare and Social Service Provision: Common Ground”

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In the early 1980s, when I was a young assistant professor teaching welfare policy, the Reagan administration’s severe cuts to social services left many of the most needy Americans fending for themselves. Into the breach stepped community organizations across the country, an overwhelming number of which were churches and other faith-based entities.

While providing guidance to local organizations trying to serve those in need of immediate assistance in the Greensboro, NC area, I found myself wondering, in meeting after meeting, why we never studied congregations and their community-serving efforts in my social work program. And so, like any eager young scholar would, I started to look into who was studying the interplay between religion, welfare and social service.

What I found, in short, was very little.

Why was there this rapid outpouring of community help in the wake of the federal government’s drastic cuts to social services? Was it a short-term response, or had the Reagan cuts exposed a more deep-rooted system of congregational support for those most in need?

I knew there must be other scholars looking into these questions, but back then, when a reference librarian was the closest thing we had to JSTOR, it required more than a little elbow grease to figure out what academic inquiry was taking place.

One of the first leads I found was a doctoral dissertation in 1982 on the Salvation Army contracting with the government to deliver social services. The scholar who wrote that dissertation, Ellen Netting, co-authored the second chapter in this volume. Another early lead was Diana Garland, an Evangelical Christian scholar at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who was studying church-based social service. Her proteges at the Diana Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University co-authored the ninth chapter and, along with Terry Wolfer, the tenth chapter.

One by one, the dots started to connect. And so it went over the course of the 1980s. From my perch in Greensboro, I spent untold hours on microfiche hunting down news stories about congregational efforts to help communities buffer the impact of the Reagan cuts. Two small case studies and a survey of Greensboro’s congregations later, I knew that a new area of study was being born.

Today, as evidenced by the works in this volume, scholars from a wide range of disciplines are examining how faith-based entities are involved in the development and implementation of social services, and more broadly how religion impacts social policy and services. The research assembled here delves deeply into the meaning of the millions of partnerships forged among religious communities, government agencies and nonprofits to address human needs for the common good and to fill holes in services created by natural and political disasters and a worldwide shrinking of the “welfare state.”

This volume begins with Edward Queen’s history of government contracting with faith-based organizations to deliver social services, from colonial times up through President George W. Bush’s controversial Faith-Based Initiative. Queen examines the interplay between voluntary organizational

development and governmental partnering with religious institutions, with a particular focus on how the Supreme Court has historically viewed such contracts.

Ellen Netting and Katherine O'Connor follow with a community-level example of Queen's overview. Their rich and thorough examination of the development of Richmond, VA's nonprofit sector provides a window into the complexity of religion's interplay with secular service development.

The next four chapters are community case studies from around the United States that reflect a simple yet all-important theme that runs through the growing body of literature on faith-based social service: People make partnerships work because they want a better community.

Carl Milofsky and Brandn Green dig into the dynamics of an unlikely institutional partnership in northeastern Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region, where a liberal arts university and a local Catholic church overcame a negative community self-image to build a successful model for service-learning projects.

Across the country in California, David Campbell takes a longitudinal view of faith-based welfare-to-work programs, demonstrating that local planning and network development are crucial to religious organizations surviving and thriving in larger community systems.

Next, the co-editor of this volume, Jay Poole, along with John Rife, Wayne Moore and Fran Pearson, traces the evolution of a Jewish philanthropic family's century-long influence on health and social services in Greensboro, from innovative mill-town services to foundational support for the world's first congregational-university social service internship program.

Jo Anne Schneider rounds out this section with a comprehensive analytical model for understanding how faith communities organize social, health, senior and education services, grounding in hard data her analysis of what goes into building and sustaining personal and organizational social capital.

The two chapters that follow tackle the controversial but undeniable fact that those who make faith a part of their social service often serve unabashedly in the name of religion.

Ian Bedford traces his Australian church's struggle to keep religious principles central to its service provision as it grew into a community provider, laying out a framework for how to keep the faith when congregations move services into the public square.

A world away, Daniel Rhodes walks a similar path, examining how his Buddhist temple in North Carolina has used faith traditions to integrate Vietnamese refugees into American life, all while struggling to maintain their distant cultural and religious identity.

The second half of this volume begins with scholarship that testifies to the enduring intellectual impact of Diana Garland. The School of Social Work at Baylor University that bears her name provides a trio of authors each for the ninth and tenth chapters.

Helen Harris, Gaynor Yancey and Dennis Myers offer a framework for conceptualizing social work field training with congregations and religiously-affiliated organizations.

Then, Terry Wolfer, along with Dennis Myers, Edward Polson and Betsy Bevis, uses service-learning concepts to analyze volunteerism among Protestant baby boomers.

They are followed by another influential scholar whose footprint is apparent throughout this volume, Mark Chaves. Along with Alison Eagle, he presents the third iteration of his National Congregations Study, the definitive demographic work on congregational social service activity in the United States.

Chaves's report, in turn, is followed by chapters from two of his former doctoral students.

Rebecca Sager, along with Keith Bentele, tackles the development of state-level religiously driven social services by analyzing the politics behind the passing of faith-based legislation.

Brad Fulton, meanwhile, examines a national increase among congregations in service provision against a corresponding decrease in political participation.

The final two chapters look beyond America's borders, to the role and practice of United States-based religious organizations in international social and economic development.

Ram Cnaan, whose groundbreaking data collection decades ago engendered a paradigm shift in the understanding of faith-based social service, lays out, together with Daniel Heist, a big-picture view of service provision abroad by American religious organizations.

Ramya Ramanath rounds out this volume by analyzing the fundraising operations of Christian international nongovernmental organizations, focusing on keys to bolstering donor retention and furthering organizational development.

The insights on these pages, though varying in focus and scope, are all aimed at building a better understanding of the intersection of religion, welfare policy and social service. With much work still to be done in the field, this volume is offered as a foundation for scholarship on the subject—so that the students of tomorrow have an easier time making sense of all this than I did 40 years ago.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.



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