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Small Faith-Related Organizations as Partners in Local Social Service Networks

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Abstract: Efforts to enlist small faith-related organizations as partners in public service delivery raise many questions. Using community social service networks as the unit of analysis, this paper asks one with broader relevance to nonprofit sector managers: What factors support and constrain effective integration of these organizations into a local service delivery network? The evidence and illustrations come from longitudinal case studies of five faith-related organizations who received their first government contract as part of a California faith-based initiative. By comparing the organizational development and network partnership trajectories of these organizations over more than a decade, the analysis identifies four key variables influencing partnership dynamics and outcomes: organizational niche within the local network; leadership connections and network legitimacy; faith-inspired commitments and persistence; and core organizational competencies and capacities. The evidence supports shifting the focus of faith-based initiatives to emphasize local planning and network development, taking into account how these four variables apply to specific organizations and their community context.

Keywords: faith; social services; organizational capacity; network; niche; community planning

1. Introduction

It has been two decades since federal welfare reform legislation cemented a shift in U.S. social policy away from cash assistance toward work-first programs designed to reinforce work incentives [1,2]. Charitable Choice provisions in the 1996 legislation sought to expand the role of faith-related organizations as government partners, with some viewing this as a way to shore up the safety net for poor citizens. Subsequently, community-level research has found that Charitable Choice did relatively little to alter pre-existing service delivery patterns, in part because congregations and other faith-related organizations were already integral parts of local social service networks, whether or not government policy or funding is involved [1,3–6]. This was true long before welfare reform and will no doubt persist, for two fundamental reasons. First, religious organizations have strong doctrinal and practical commitments to serve the poor and needy [1,7,8]. Second, in many poor neighborhoods and communities, churches and small faith-related nonprofits are among the few visible, viable (if not always thriving), and trusted institutions of any kind [9–14].

While students of social policy have much to gain by understanding the roles played by small, faith-related nonprofit organizations in local social service networks, these organizations pose a paradox as network partners. On the one hand, because they are often the only entity serving the most destitute clients and neighborhoods, faith-related organizations occupy a critical locational, cultural, and/or programmatic niche. On the other hand, their characteristic ways of working with program participants—marked by adaptive relationship-building that meets clients where they are rather than deployment of static, pre-set programs—fit uneasily into a social service world increasingly marked by bureaucratic norms, standardized programs, and rigid accountability metrics. While much

attention has focused on how government can partner with these organizations within church-state legal restrictions [15,16], the larger question posed is how to integrate these types of organizations into reciprocal network relationships governed by prevailing professional norms and standards. Many of the same issues are raised by partnerships with secular nonprofits of limited size and capacity, although they are not the focus of this analysis.

To explore this issue further, this paper asks: What primary considerations should inform local network leaders and the directors of small, faith-related organizations as they develop partnerships? The data come from unique access to five faith-related organizations which received their first-ever government contract during a California faith-based initiative. Using data points spanning more than a decade, we can describe and compare the organizational and network partnership trajectories of these five organizations. Using a combination of outcome and process analysis, the research isolates four key variables that distinguish more or less successful partnership outcomes: organizational niche within the local network; leadership connections and network legitimacy (*i.e.*, being perceived as a good partner by existing network leaders, especially those in key organizations that can supply funding, referrals, or other resources); faith-inspired commitments and persistence; and core organizational competencies and capacities. The findings support recommendations for policy makers, local network leaders, and the directors of faith-related nonprofit organizations. Though the focus is on faith-related organizations, the insights have relevance to a broader class of smaller nonprofits engaged in human service delivery.

2. A Local Network Perspective on Faith-Based Initiatives

Two inter-related concerns about organizational approach and capacity have been raised in the literature on faith-based initiatives. The first is that small, faith-related organizations do not have the staff capacity needed to manage government funding and associated accountability and reporting requirements [17–19]. The corresponding concern is that developing this capacity will erode the distinctive characteristics that make these organizations valuable in the first place [15,20]. Indeed, much of the literature emphasizes the drawbacks of government funding for nonprofits including mission creep, bureaucratization, burdensome paperwork, diminishing support from volunteers, and a general loss of the organizational characteristics that make them a viable alternative to government [21–25]. Some research finds benefits, noting that government grants provide seed funding that fuels nonprofit initiative, confers organizational legitimacy and visibility, builds managerial capacity, and enables better quality services [26,27].

Evidence suggests that government collaborations with faith-related organizations will require nuance and flexibility on both sides, attending both to the community context and to the specific nature and attributes of the faith-related organization [1,3]. The difficult work of supporting individuals in need requires pragmatic, locally-specific coordination to improve service integration and network governance [28,29]. Research shows that most clients receive social services from multiple agencies simultaneously [6,30]; that the services of faith-related organizations are intricately braided with those provided by publicly funded social service agencies [4,5]; and that there are few major differences between the efficacy of services provided by faith-related and secular organizations [3,31]. The challenge is less to find a single best provider according to pre-set criteria than to coordinate community assets to meet the specific needs of program participants and community partners. Thus, instead of comparing organizational effectiveness in isolation, researchers have begun to focus on a more compelling question: How do various local social service providers, both public and private, collaborate to create integrated systems of care? [1,32]. The work is practical and involves finding better ways to support information and resource sharing, cross training or co-location of staff, and other day-to-day coordination mechanisms that are essential to improve outcomes for client, organizations, and communities.

Many local social service networks still operate as closed systems in which government generally partners only with a few, large nonprofits that mimic the culture and practices of government

organizations [33]. Whether these established patterns can or should shift is an open question. A key issue raised by previous research is whether this effort will be driven by the self-serving needs of politicians and administrators for symbolic or token faith-based partners or by a genuine effort to forge partnerships that acknowledge the promise and limits of particular faith-related organizations [5,34,35].

3. Approach and Methods

The author's engagement with these issues began during research on how local communities were implementing welfare reform [33] and continued during evaluation research examining the California Community and Faith-Based Initiative (CFBI). Backed by Governor Gray Davis, CFBI funded 40 community and faith-related organizations as partners in government workforce development efforts, primarily during the years 2002–2005. The goal was to harness the unique locational and cultural assets of these organizations to expand the reach of workforce development service to underserved populations, including ex-offenders, recovering addicts, and the homeless. As documented elsewhere [30,32,36], the initiative succeeded in expanding the reach of workforce services, and demonstrated that a focused effort by a state agency could indeed increase the organizational capacity of non-profit partners, including both secular and faith-related organizations. But the evaluation and subsequent follow up research also called into question the staying power of the resulting partnerships. Mirroring the findings of related studies, a survey conducted in 2008, three years after the initiative ended, found that about a third of the faith-related organizations for whom the state grant was their first government contract had closed [32,37].

Building on the earlier work, this study traces the organizational and network partnership trajectories of five small, faith-related organizations that were involved in the California initiative. The five cases were purposively selected from a sample of 14 nonprofits which researchers studied using community network analysis during the CFBI evaluation [36]. The selection criterion was straightforward: the case histories represent the five faith-related organizations among the 14 for whom the funding was their first-ever government grant. Secular nonprofits (5) and faith-related organizations which did have previous contracting experience (4) were excluded. Table 1 presents basic information on the five organizations.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample Organizations.

Organization	Location	Faith Category ^a	Years Org Established Prior to EDD Grant	Approximate Staff-Participant Ratio	~# of Orgs in Organizational Network ^b	~% ED Time Spent on External Networking ^c
Zaferia Shalom	Long Beach	Faith-background	10	1–12	33	25%
Helping Hands of Hope	Berkeley	Faith-background	0	1–5	35	15%
CHAMPIONS Recovery	Hanford	Faith-centered	2	1–15	67	50%
Tabitha's House	Bakersfield	Faith-centered	10	1–7	NA	NA
Welcome Home Ministries	San Diego	Faith-centered	8	1–8	81	90%

^a Based on the categorization scheme developed by Sider and Unruh [16]; ^b Based on network mapping exercise conducted with organizations in 2005 (Tabitha's House did not participate); ^c Based on interview question with executive directors in 2005 (Tabitha's House did not participate).

The data make it possible to track the ebb and flow of each organization's status and government funding partnerships from their founding until early 2016, over periods of time ranging from 14 to 24 years. Data sources include semi-structured interviews from the 2002–2005 evaluation revealing the experiences and perspectives of executive directors and staff, program participants, partner organizations, and leaders in the local service network. Two of the five organizations closed at or near

the end of their CFBI grant. For the three organizations that outlived the grant, additional interviews were conducted with executive directors in 2008 and in 2016 to track post-grant developments. All told, there are approximately three dozen interviews for each of the organizations that remain open and 6–8 for the two now closed. Other methods informing the case histories include site visits, direct observation of programs, the creation of network-connection maps, and a review of relevant documents. The sample offers one of the few chances to track local partnership outcomes of faith-related organizations longitudinally.

4. Outcome Analysis

Table 2 summarizes the government partnership trajectories of the five organizations at five different points in time. All five at baseline had no government contracts or workforce development programs, and then developed those during the CFBI grant cycle. The CFBI evaluation found that all five successfully managed their contracts and met basic performance benchmarks and all were rated as “good” partners by EDD program managers. Even during the grant period, however, there were signs that they had different long-term potential as government partners. One of the five (Welcome Home) developed an active partnership with a One-Stop Center (the name given to local, government-run workforce development programs and services in California), grew in sophistication and community visibility, and successfully competed for a federal Department of Labor grant in 2004. Another one of the five organizations (Champions) developed loose connections with a One-Stop, experienced significant growth in administrative capacity and community visibility, and succeeded in receiving a large new contract from the Kings County Alcohol and Drug agency. Of the remaining three organizations, Helping Hands of Hope and Tabitha’s House developed only very modest connections to the One-Stop, while Zaferia Shalom Zone Agency found their overtures to the One-Stop were not reciprocated. Of these three organizations, Tabitha’s House secured new funding after CFBI as part of a coalition of local housing agencies serving the homeless, while the other two organizations were less visible locally and ceased all operations at or near the end of the CFBI grant.

As of our 2008 interviews, all three of the remaining organizations continued to receive some form of government contract, but none had a formal workforce development program. By 2016, one of the remaining three organizations (Champions) had grown substantially and become highly integrated into its local service delivery network, receiving numerous government contracts; one (Welcome Home) continued at roughly the same size and maintained an active partnership (though no contract) with local correctional officials; the other organization (Tabitha’s House) now is back to its pre-CFBI initiative form as a small, personal ministry supported by volunteers and with no paid staff.

Table 2. Government Partnership Trajectories of Sample Organizations.

	Pre 2002 (Before CFBI Grant)		2002–2005 (During CFBI Grant)		2005 (Post CFBI Grant)		2008		2016	
	Gov't Contract	Workforce Program	Gov't Contract	Workforce Program	Gov't Contract	Workforce Program	Gov't Contract	Workforce Program	Gov't Contract	Workforce Program
Champions Recovery	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Helping Hands of Hope	N	N	Y	Y	N-closed	N-closed	N-closed	N-closed	N-closed	N-closed
Tabitha's House	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y-downsized	Y	N	N	N
Welcome Home Ministries	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N
Zaferia Shalom	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y-downsized	N-closed	N-closed	N-closed	N-closed

5. Case Histories

To put the outcome data in context and understand the dynamic factors leading to different partnership trajectories, brief case histories of the five organizations were constructed. The five shared a few general characteristics. All worked with substance abusers, ex-offenders, and the homeless, populations which some research finds faith-related organizations and programs are especially effective in serving [9,31,34,38]. Each served clients who are not well-served by government programs, often because they fear and distrust the government too much to use its services, or because performance targets make government providers reluctant to enroll them (creaming). Each organization deployed highly individualized programs that attempted to meet clients where they were, while also seeking to promote new attitudes, skills, and knowledge. Each deployed staff that shared affinities and life experiences with the clients they were serving. Against the background of these similarities, the condensed case histories we present are intended to bring into view differences in their histories, approach, and partnership trajectories. Three of the five were founded and directed by Christian women with an evangelical passion to serve “the least of these”. These began as a personal ministry, incorporated and expanded using CFBI funds, and adapted when that funding ended. The other two organizations were spawned as community ministries by local congregations, but for different reasons closed at or near the end of the state initiative. These two will be considered first.

5.1. *Zaferia Shalom*

Zaferia began as a small, volunteer-driven ministry of a local United Methodist Church in Long Beach, part of their response to the riots that occurred after the Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles. The church, since closed, was situated in a low-income neighborhood where many individuals lacked cars and access to social services. Zaferia was the oldest of the five organizations studied. For 10 years prior to the CFBI grant, church volunteers provided walk-in services, such as a clothes closet. The workforce development grant provided \$438,000 over a three-year period, used to hire a full-time staff member and to provide resources to support job training activities including computer training, work clothes, resume assistance, interview skill development, as well as budgeting and other life skills. Housed in the social hall of the church, the program lacked dedicated space and was available only during set hours of 9–3 Monday through Friday and a couple of evenings during the week.

Zaferia’s eventual closure was driven by an event beyond the program’s control: the decision of the local Methodist officials to close its host congregation. Yet even prior to this event, there were signs that the nonprofit was having difficulty staking out a broader niche in the local social service network. Midway through the CFBI grant, another local nonprofit that had been referring clients to Zaferia got its own grant to do essentially the same work, causing the Zaferia caseload to dwindle dramatically. And despite a push from CFBI program managers to create better relationships between the CFBI-funded nonprofits and government run One-Stops, Zaferia reported being repeatedly rebuffed by local workforce officials when they reached out.

Since Zaferia’s identity and organizational resources were inextricably linked to the local Methodist church, its closure was perhaps inevitable. On the other hand, many small non-profits do successfully spin off from a church and create independent organizations. One can imagine a scenario where the CFBI funding helped the organization expand and deepen its community partnerships, such that it became a valued resource and attracted funding from government or other entities. In this case, that is not what happened. Indeed, when we did a network mapping exercise with Zaferia’s executive director in 2005, she reported the lowest total number of network connections of any of the organizations surveyed.

5.2. *Helping Hands of Hope*

Like Zaferia, Helping Hands began as an affiliated community ministry of a local congregation, in this case the Berkeley Mt. Zion Church. Unlike Zaferia, it incorporated just a few months before

receiving CFBI funding in spring of 2002. Over three years, Helping Hands received \$295,000 in state EDD funds, using it to create a job training program featuring many of the same elements that Zaferia had emphasized: computer training, resume and interviewing assistance, and related life skills. Unlike the drop-in, individually paced Zaferia program, Helping Hands programs required participants to attend regularly scheduled computer skills training classes over a period of six or more weeks. Part of the idea was to mimic a work-like culture where regular attendance was the norm. Although they served others in need, the primary target of Helping Hands programs were individuals who were previously incarcerated and now trying to get their lives back on track by securing employment.

Helping Hands operated out of a small trailer in a closed school facility, set in the middle of a low-income neighborhood. The campus had a decidedly run down and unkempt feel, a result of not having been maintained by the city schools for some time. Still, the program was able to attract and graduate many students during the three years of the grant. Like Zaferia however, its executive director reported a low number of network connections and devoted the smallest percentage of time to external networking among those directors we surveyed.

By the time of our end-of-grant survey of participating CFBI organizations in 2005, Helping Hands had already closed its doors. Because we were unable to speak with an organizational representative at that time, we do not know the full story behind the decision to close, but the inability to secure new funding clearly played a role.

5.3. Champions Recovery Alternative Programs, Inc.

Champions was founded in May 2000 and occupied a graceful Victorian building in downtown Hanford, the county seat of rural and agricultural Kings County. The idea for the organization's substance abuse treatment program was incubated at the nearby Koinonia Christian Church by founding executive director Sue Braz. In addition to strong Christian beliefs, the director brought an extensive background in social services and Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous (AA/NA) recovery programs, and was previously employed by county government.

Unlike other treatment programs in the community, Champions focused its initial programmatic effort on problems peculiar to the 14–25-year-old population, placing drug and alcohol treatment in the context of their lives and needs. Many clients were “court ordered.” Champions set up outpatient treatment plans that incorporated 12-Step programs along with strict requirements for finding employment or continuing in education. Most staff members were in recovery themselves and thus had additional credibility in the eyes of their young clients. The director recognized the ongoing challenges associated with drug recovery work, and freely admitted that many of the young participants they serve stumble and relapse. But many returned to try again, and she had full trust that God had called her to the work and will provide what is needed to move forward, one day at a time.

Director Braz also brought to her work a strong motivation and goal of increasing the professionalism of the organization. Motivated by the opportunity to seek state faith-based funding, which required nonprofit status, the organization incorporated in January 2001. It was certified by the state Alcohol and Drug Program in September 2001. Funds received through the state CFBI grant (\$438,000 over a 3-year period from 2001 to 2004) were a vital source of organizational support throughout the start-up years, and the director credited Employment Development Department technical assistance during its state grant with helping Champions develop from a small grassroots group to a larger and more effective organization. The grant also provided an occasion to develop reciprocal relationships with the local One-Stop Career Center, to establish a best practices program model, and to generate hard data on participant outcomes. The visibility and legitimacy conferred by the grant has helped Champions secure a series of state and local government grants and contracts, including funds from the county welfare-to-work program, county Alcohol and Drug program, the state Substance Abuse Services Coordinating Agency, and a Strengthening Families grant for parents on methamphetamines. The major perceived drawback to the EDD grant concerned the volume of paperwork required.

At the height of its state grant, Champions had 8.5 paid staff and 60 program participants. As of fall 2007, it had continued to grow, with 12 paid staff members, 5 contract staff, and 5 interns and approximately 100 program participants. A 2016 follow-up found Champions growing much larger while also having undergone a transition to a new executive director. Champions still receives multiple government contracts from local and federal agencies, and now has a total of 48 full-time or part-time staff and a large budget of approximately \$1 million per year.

The process of organizational growth was not without difficulties. Some inexperienced board members and staff committed serious errors that threatened contracting relationships, but the director typically was able to learn from mistakes, correct them, and move on. Interviews with local officials suggest that by 2005 Champions had already evolved from its image as “one of those church groups” ignored or sneered at in local meetings to a point where the organization was widely acknowledged as a key provider of drug and alcohol recovery in Kings County. Officials seemed less concerned with Champions being faith-based than with the possibility that it would be unable to continue its programs after state funding ended, a fear that proved to be unfounded.

In retrospect, Champions is the most successful of the five organizations in terms of growth and of becoming an established part of the local social services network. It serves youth that cannot receive similar services anywhere else in the county and has a track record of bringing new resources into the community. Its service portfolio has expanded significantly over the past decade, with two residential treatment facilities (one for men and one for women) in place and programs aimed at family recovery and unification. These meet a critical need, since in addition to gaining sobriety and employment, housing is the other big issue facing program participants, with many cases of relapse traced to the influences of living environments in which drugs are present.

5.4. *Tabitha's House*

Tabitha's House is a faith-based sober-living facility founded in Bakersfield in 1992 by Miss Benny Jacobs, an African-American and ordained minister (known affectionately by all simply as “Miss Benny”). Starting as a personal outreach ministry, Tabitha's House initially served five women in a single home, gradually expanding to occupy seventy-two units in an abandoned motel. Unique among area recovery facilities, Tabitha's House has provided housing for the spouses, partners, and children of their participants. The state grant in 2001 was Tabitha's first from a government source, and represented a major new infusion of resources (\$357,000 over three and one-half years). EDD funds allowed Tabitha's to add a new work readiness component called the Goals for Life program to its existing recovery program. Among our five organizations, Tabitha's was the one in which it was most difficult to discern if church-state boundaries were being strictly kept. While the staff took pains to wall off the Goals for Life program from religious elements, all Tabitha's residents were strongly encouraged to participate in Miss Benny's daily Bible studies. The director's expressed vision and everyday language and actions reflect her strong belief that without recognizing God's presence, it will be more difficult for individuals to gain and maintain sobriety.

State funding ceased at the end of January 2005, and resulted in a nearly complete elimination of workforce services on site. Before this time, Tabitha's House applied for and received a large (\$408,500) HUD grant to provide transitional housing to the homeless population, as part of a collaboration of local service providers. A year later they were successful in winning an even larger HUD grant (over a million dollars). However, the success at getting grants revealed significant organizational shortcomings. The director and staff had difficulty navigating program rules requiring matching funds or other anticipated costs, creating a variety of financial and legal issues. As debt accumulated, Tabitha's hired a new contract administrator to put together a long-term plan for the organization's financial recovery, but the difficulties impacted both the viability of the organization as a partner in the eyes of public officials and the willingness of the executive director to continue seeking grants and contracts.

As of fall 2007, Tabitha's House had 15 full time staff and 3 contract personnel, serving 100 clients at any given time, usually for extended periods. But by 2016, Tabitha's House had returned to something like its early form as a personal ministry. It still provided spiritual guidance and sober living services to families and singles, but "only by the grace of God" according to Miss Benny. It no longer receives government grants or contracts, nor does it employ paid staff, relying instead on four volunteers in addition to the director.

Tabitha's House presents something of a paradox. On the one hand, as the only residential treatment facility in the area that houses entire families, and with the director's reputation for welcoming even the most difficult program participants with unconditional love and genuine hope, it for a few years gained favor with such local agencies as the Department of Human Services, Department of Mental Health, the California Youth Authority, the Probation Department, Child Protective Services and others. But this move toward local network collaboration was not sustained for very long. The Director's strength—serving anyone who shows up with a whole heart—was offset by limited focus on building the organization's capacity to manage grants and contracts. Today, Tabitha's House is not a major partner in the local service delivery network, but continues to do work of value. Miss Benny devotes her life energies to the work, despite her advanced age (84) and significant personal obstacles. Tabitha's House sustains itself as a labor of love, operating for the most part off the radar screen of local network officials.

5.5. Welcome Home Ministry

In August 1994, experienced nurse Carmen Warner-Robbins began one-on-one visits with women in a San Diego county jail in her role as prison chaplain. Concerned with high rates of recidivism, she and her husband began working to help the women find jobs and reintegrate into society upon their release. Inspired by a message received during prayer, she began enlisting the women at the jail in designing and implementing a nonprofit organization called Welcome Home Ministry.

The model that evolved was built on the premise of peer-to-peer support. The post-release support begins by meeting each woman at the jail on the day of their release, providing them with toiletries and other basic essentials, finding them a place to live—usually in a treatment facility—and supporting their efforts to garner meaningful employment. The participants are invited into an ever-growing support network comprised of women who have faced similar situations and challenges. The Welcome Home "family", born when the first woman was picked up from jail in 1996, today consists of hundreds of women, many of whom meet for monthly potlucks that combine elements associated with support groups, twelve-step meetings, and church socials.

For its first few years Welcome Home operated as a personal outreach ministry, sustained primarily by private donations and the volunteer efforts of the director, her husband, and some of the original participants. In April 2000, the organization incorporated as a 501(c)(3) organization, and for many years received and successfully managed a series of sizable government grants, beginning with its state faith-based initiative grant (\$393,500 over 3 years). In subsequent years they received major grants totaling over \$1 million from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, and smaller grants from the Department of Labor, among others. Of note, the director's husband, a veteran of government social service programs, brought his expertise to bear in helping with the requirements of government contracting.

As of fall 2007, Welcome Home had 10 paid staff (several of them former clients) and connections with approximately 100 community volunteers, although the heart of its approach has always remained the peer support model. In general the organization weathered its early years as a nonprofit with fewer growing pains than might ordinarily be expected. Community leaders interviewed in 2004 expressed uniformly high regard for the organization. In addition to the organization's demonstrated ability to deliver services and partner with both prison officials and local employers, Welcome Home has the advantage of operating in a county that has been at the forefront of efforts to explore alternatives to

government programs, having pioneered the idea of “managed competition” and developed active partnerships with the faith community during the early years of welfare reform [39].

Welcome Home recognizes the need to demonstrate program success. Two independent studies have found that the Welcome Home approach and services have substantially reduced the recidivism rate among those served, compared with prevailing norms [40,41]. The more rigorous of the two found that only 23% of Welcome Home participants enrolled in a study were rearrested 12-months following their release compared to an overall recidivism rate in California prisons of 66% [41]. The director’s role in commissioning these outcome studies reflects her strong commitment to establishing the validity of the Welcome Home model, in hopes it will spread to other correctional facilities and communities.

A 2016 follow-up found that Welcome Home continues to provide a robust peer support network, operating in partnership with local prison officials and with various community partners. The organization itself no longer receives government grants, but its approach to prisoner re-entry has become a widely disseminated model that is shaping how public and private funding is being directed in prison systems. The Welcome Home narrative suggests another less expected way in which small, faith-related nonprofits can be sources of public value—by developing a model that can then inform a broader array of public and private efforts.

6. Comparative Analysis

The analysis of the organizational development and local partnership trajectories of these five organizations brings into view a number of important distinctions. In reviewing these, the focus is primarily on distinctions between the two organizations that have closed their doors and the three that are still operational, but additional consideration is given to more fine-grained distinctions between the latter three. Are there lessons from the comparisons that can help both nonprofit managers and their network partners better discern when and if to enter into collaborative partnerships, and to navigate the process of mutual assessment and adjustment that ensues? Four variables seem most relevant: organizational niche within the local network; leadership connections and network legitimacy; faith-inspired commitments and persistence, and core organizational competencies and capacities.

6.1. Organizational Niche

Understandably, the best network partners are those who bring to the table something different than what already exists. Both the now defunct organizations duplicated job training services that were also provided by the One-Stop Centers and/or by other nonprofits in the community. While they helped expand the reach of these services in their particular neighborhoods, they did less to distinguish themselves as adding unique value. By contrast, the three sustained organizations provided drug recovery and/or housing services that were unique in their communities. This made them more valuable as a place to refer individuals and as a portal into the workforce development network for individuals needing significant amounts of remedial care. Also of note, the three successful organizations had programs that featured strong peer/group support features among participants, and some form of 24/7 care and support, while the other two did not.

It is not particularly surprising that occupying a unique organizational or programmatic niche is a key factor correlated with successful nonprofit development. Less obvious is the manner in which a niche is defined in our three enduring cases. Research has focused on the ability of faith-based organizations to specialize in the services they provide, and/or on clients who are selected or self-select based in part of religious affinity [3,31]. By contrast, findings from this research suggest that the three successful organizations combined: (1) highly specialized niche clientele, defined primarily in terms of individuals with substance abuse related drug convictions and/or incarceration, and only secondarily in terms of possible religious affinity with the organization, which was often not the case; and (2) broad service portfolios, which attempted to meet a wide range of client needs from spiritual and emotional support, to system navigation and referrals, to material support resources for daily needs, as well as some form of mental health services. Specialists in one sense, the organizations are multi-task

generalists in another, a reality that may be obscured by the use of the term “niche”. Each combines drug recovery work with attention to housing, employment, and health care needs, but in distinct, locally-adapted fashions and with different combinations of emphasis. Importantly, each relies to a significant degree on referrals or partnership connections with public agencies.

The changes these organizations seek in client lives are complex and require action on multiple fronts over time. Clients may succeed in kicking their drug habit but fail to find employment. They may be on the road to recovery but be forced into housing choices that put them amidst the same destructive influences that led them to drugs in the first place. They may succeed on all three fronts—sobriety, employment, and housing—for years, only to relapse under the stress of some difficult personal crisis.

Operating in this type of environment brings a persistent organizational tension between providing the breadth of support services clients need, on the one hand, and focusing on what the organization is good at and can reasonably do, on the other. Although most acutely experienced by Tabitha’s, we found all three organizations at risk of overextending their staff and resources—taking on more tasks and needs than a small organization can effectively manage [14,42]. This reality is tied to larger trends in how public policy supports, or fails to support, poor individuals and distressed communities [5,43]. It is one thing to fill a small niche or gap in the local network by providing for a limited set of participant needs, quite another to fill a gaping hole amidst a shredded safety net by serving multi-need clients that others in the network will not or cannot serve.

6.2. Leadership Connections and Network Legitimacy

Among this sample of faith-related organizations, executive directors who enjoyed and excelled at community networking had a decided edge over those who spent most of their time in direct service provision. The three more successful organizations were formed and sustained by strong, charismatic leaders who became highly visible in local networks and spent a good deal of their time on external networking; this was not the case in the other two organizations, which lacked a similarly recognizable and vocal champion.

Having executive directors with a deep sense of mission and purpose matters, but it must be matched by an ability to translate that zeal into effective networking. Making local connections increases organizational visibility and can also build partnerships that help clients navigate the network, securing needed services and supports. The need to build relationships with key actors and partners in a wide range of community organizations and service realms puts tremendous demands on nonprofit executive directors. The directors cope primarily by being willing to work long hours for their cause and by relying on core staff to handle many internal organizational functions.

Among the three still-functioning organizations, the executive directors brought a slightly different focus as they made network connections, with consequences for their long-term partnership trajectories. Sue Braz of Champions made it a point of emphasis to build the professional skills and capacity of her organization, with an explicit and largely successful goal of becoming an embedded fixture in the local social services network. Her vision for the organization involved tying together faith-inspired compassion and competent professional service. Welcome Home’s director put less emphasis on professionalism per se than on building the organization’s peer support network for participants while maintaining close partnerships with corrections officials. Her networking energy and focus also went toward spreading the Welcome Home model to other institutions and communities, including more recent work with a national prison ministry coalition. Finally, Miss Benny stayed true to her original vision of Tabitha’s House as a ministry rooted in faith and committed to serving those who found their way to her door. She was less focused on how her organization fit into broader network structures, beyond being visible enough to attract client referrals from other agencies.

6.3. Faith-Inspired Commitments and Persistence

Faith-related organizations face a dual burden in establishing a reputation within local networks. They have to be convincing on the same terms as other nonprofits—seen as valuable, reliable,

and cost-effective partners—but also must operate in a fashion that does not raise concerns about church-state issues. What counts as meeting these different standards can be a moving target, varying according to which funding source or to which specific network players the organization must relate at any given time. Using the terminology developed by Sider and Unruh [16], the two organizations that were not sustained were categorized by the CFBI evaluation as “faith-background” as opposed to the “faith-centered” approaches in the three more successful cases. All three of the sustained organizations insisted on staying true to their faith commitments as the essential grounding for their work and as essential to participant outcomes, even while abiding by the spirit of church-state restrictions that accompanied their state grant. By contrast, the two organizations that shut their doors went out of their way to present a more or less secular program.

Given the small sample of cases, it is hard to draw firm conclusions about the role these differences played in the eventual success or demise of the five organizations. What can be said is that faith commitments clearly played a significant role in explaining the persistence of the three enduring organizations and the adaptive tenacity of their leaders. All three directors bring a deep sense of religious calling to their work, describing it as a faithful response to God’s call to be in service to others. While the specific language the three leaders used to describe their faith commitments varied, the centrality of faith to their everyday pursuits was presumed. It manifested itself in many ways beyond the regular use of religious language, including resilience in the face of organizational adversity, a belief that all their participants are children of God deserving love and respect, willingness in one way or another to go the extra mile on behalf of those participants, and a hopeful outlook in the face of difficulties.

Since many of their program participants are among the hardest-to-serve, the organizations are not well suited to compare favorably with other service providers on traditional outcome measures [36,44]. Indeed, one of the key ways in which faith manifests itself in these organizations is in the form of resilience and hope—the belief that making the effort with each and every program participant is its own reward, regardless of the final outcome. Thus, a basic assumption of their programs often runs counter to prevailing notions of outcomes accountability, even while it may also help expand the reach of services to individuals otherwise not well served in the local network.

6.4. Core Staff Competencies and Capacities

The need of small faith-related organizations for relatively high levels of technical assistance in order to manage government contracts, at least initially, is supported by all the five cases [3,42,44,45]. However, it will be difficult for government or other intermediaries to plan and implement these efforts with broad brush approaches or uniform results. Reasons include variations in what executive directors and staff already know, in their capacity to absorb and integrate assistance, and in their access to alternative technical assistance resources. Organizational capacity is not a simple function of size or of any other variable that can be measured at a single point in time. All the organizations saw their capacity to manage grants shift and change over the years, not always in a linear, upward progression. Because the organizations began or remain relatively small, much depends on the inclinations, skills, and resilience of the director, staff, board, and other volunteers, as these may come and go. As in any organization, not all employees or volunteers work out, and some create real grant management problems.

One key variable linked to better success occurs when employees or key volunteers bring significant relevant experience in government or other organizations, rather than being selected simply due to their affinity with program participants or relationship with the executive director. Having internal management capacity and skills not only makes grant management go more smoothly, it can free executive directors to spend more time on local networking. Though it varied somewhat among the successful three, all had or gained access to individuals who could supplement the director’s passion and vision with strong professional skills.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Among this sample, the findings suggest that small, faith-related nonprofits are more likely to succeed as long-term government partners when they (1) occupy a unique and valuable programmatic niche in the community; (2) have executive directors who commit themselves to developing and deepening network connections; (3) operate within church-state guidelines while embodying faith commitments that inspire and inform an ethic of hope-filled service to participants and persistent resilience in the face of organizational challenges, and (4) are willing and able to develop an organizational culture that balances street-friendly service with basic bureaucratic competency. Clearly, much of what we have found is relevant to the broader set of smaller, less-established nonprofit organizations, but our focus in this paper has been on the small, faith-related organizations that have been the focus of recent social policy initiatives.

The case histories reveal persistent and perhaps unavoidable tensions as organizations move in these directions. Specializing in clients that others cannot or will not serve causes pressures to over-commit by providing too many different types of services [42]. Finding staff that can bridge the cultural worlds of hard core drug addicts and accountability-driven bureaucrats is not easy, yet the option of hiring some staff for each purpose is expensive and potentially divisive [45]. Time spent building network connections comes at a cost of attending to internal organizational concerns, and often draws executive directors away from the realm of compassionate one-on-one service that is their primary strength and motivation.

It will not be easy or straightforward for most small nonprofits to cope with these tensions. Indeed, even the three relatively successful cases in our sample provide cautionary evidence. We would be wise to temper claims that smaller nonprofits, faith-related or otherwise, can suddenly become a much more integral presence in the overall service delivery landscape, much less carry the full weight of restoring a safety net. On the other hand, failure to integrate these organizations into community networks forfeits the opportunity to harness the power and persistence of their work and to stake out an oasis of care for individuals otherwise left to fend for themselves against overwhelming odds.

As an element of federal policy, faith-based initiatives clearly have had important symbolic value to politicians on the right and the left, as evident in the last two Presidential administrations. By taking community planning and service delivery networks as the key unit of analysis, our work moves the discussion to a more grounded level, and suggests three overarching policy recommendations.

First, as is clear from this and earlier work, we need to be very careful in defining the objectives sought by faith-based initiatives. A shift in focus is needed, from how single organizations or programs serve the poor one at a time, to how we coordinate networks of providers in particular communities. The focus of faith-based initiatives should be on community planning and local network development, rather than simply on leveling the playing field or improving services within existing silos. This would require a very different emphasis in federal and state policy than has been true during the past two administrations [1,4,5]. Instead of piecemeal, short-term funding of one or two faith-related organizations in any given community, a better approach would support a more deliberate and comprehensive strategy of local network development and community planning, in which the assets and limitations of a wide range of local organizations are considered [32]. Along with this, we need to be more realistic about the levels of funding needed to support the comprehensive services required to address poverty at the local level [4,5,43].

Second, we need to realize that developing network partnerships with smaller faith-related organization will require flexible approaches. These approaches need to vary depending on the assets and gaps in the local service delivery network, as these are compared to the niche roles, leadership vision, faith commitments, and organizational capacity of potential partner organizations. As the traditional wisdom has suggested, government will find it easier and more efficient to focus on partnering with nonprofits with some track record and evidence of organizational stability. At the same time, we have seen that small, new faith-related nonprofits can and sometimes do develop into important partners, particularly when they occupy a unique organizational or programmatic niche

or otherwise function in ways that expand the reach of services [42,44]. The evidence also suggests that their evolution as government partners will likely take more time and investment than is often expected, and may proceed unevenly as the organizations' struggle to develop internal capacity and external legitimacy. For every organization that may evolve into an ongoing contractual partner, like Champions, there will be cases like Welcome Home where the nonprofit helps redirect funds and program priorities within existing public institutions, or like Tabitha's which is willing to accept as many referrals from public agencies as it can handle at a given point in time, but otherwise keeps to its own business of faith-based sobriety work.

Third, while church-state issues are important, they are not the core issue that partnerships with small faith-related organizations pose for government. The core issue is how the practices of these organizations—emphasizing flexible, individual treatment rather than pre-set programs, faithful service rather than short-term outcomes, *etc.*—can be meshed with the types of accountability requirements to which most social programs are now held by both government and private foundations. Perhaps one of the underappreciated values these organizations bring is to call into question accountability regimes which fail to reflect the actual street-level work and community coordination that is required to repair broken lives and neighborhoods [46]. At times awkwardly but often heroically, the community-based work continues, requiring our best efforts at understanding and support.

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