

Faith-based responses to homelessness in Greater Seattle: A grounded theory approach

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Abstract

This article reports on the key findings of a 2-year study of faith-based responses to homelessness in Greater Seattle (the United States). Leveraging opportunities and negotiating constraints through experimentation, congregations, and faith-based non-profits, in different ways, are striving to blend local knowledge and professional knowledge, the adaptability of bottom-up civic engagement and the complexities of top-down programming to rethink homelessness interventions. After considering this picture of faith-based organizations (FBOs) as community problem solvers, we sketch three case studies of innovative initiatives: the Network Builders program of Catholic Community Services of Western Washington-King County, the interfaith and cross-sectoral campaign against family homelessness spearheaded by Associated Ministries of Tacoma-Pierce County, and the Para-Navigator partnership between Everett Gospel Mission and the municipal government of Snohomish County.

Keywords

civic capacity, community revitalization, faith-based organizations, Greater Seattle (USA), grounded theory, homelessness

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Résumé

Cet article présente les principaux résultats d'une étude de deux ans sur les réponses confessionnelles apportées au problème du sans-abrisme dans le Grand Seattle (États-Unis). Tirant parti des opportunités et négociant les contraintes par l'expérimentation, les congrégations et les organisations confessionnelles sans but lucratif s'efforcent, de différentes manières, de combiner les connaissances locales et les connaissances professionnelles, l'adaptabilité de l'engagement civique *bottom-up* et la complexité des programmes *top-down* pour repenser les interventions en matière de sans-abrisme. Après avoir considéré le profil des organisations confessionnelles en tant qu'organisations de résolution des problèmes communautaires, nous esquissons trois études de cas d'initiatives innovantes: le programme Network Builders des Catholic Community Services du comté de Western Washington-King; la campagne interconfessionnelle et intersectorielle contre le sans-abrisme familial menée par les ministères associés du comté de Tacoma-Pierce; et le partenariat Para-Navigator entre Everett Gospel Mission et le gouvernement municipal du comté de Snohomish.

Mots-clés

capacité civique, Greater Seattle (États-Unis), organisations religieuses, revitalisation des communautés, sans-abrisme, théorie ancrée

The important role that faith-based organizations (FBOs) play in revitalizing local communities across the United States has been acknowledged at least since Alexis de Tocqueville advanced his famous thesis in the first-half of the nineteenth century (2000 [1835 and 1840]). From the American Anti-Slavery Society and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, through the Social Gospel, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Interreligious Committee Against Poverty, up to the Sanctuary movement and faith-based initiatives, the key role that FBOs have played in American public life as problem solvers can be historically traced to the voluntary religious congregation, which, as part of a system of denominational pluralism, facilitated the emergence of a privately regulated civil society and an anti-statist, liberal welfare regime (Lipset, 1996). In opposition to the European case, it was the twin clauses of disestablishment and free exercise – paradoxically, the separation of church and state – that made religion an important civic force. Socially engaged, local FBOs are the quintessential manifestation of a unique process of secularization – a process that has transformed individual beliefs and practices, but has not necessarily resulted in the privatization of religion (Casanova, 2013).

Even as we observe the fallout in traditional religious beliefs and practices that is transforming the religious landscape of the United States, as across the country the number of religious 'nones' is rapidly on the rise (Pew Research Center, 2015), the interplay of two dynamics are giving further impetus to the engagement of FBOs in community development efforts (Beaumont, 2008; Beaumont and Baker, 2011). On one hand, the vertical pivot downward from national to local government, and the horizontal

pivot outward from the state to business and civil society, that has been transforming public policy and community development since the 1970s (Briggs, 2008; Katz and Nowak, 2018). On the other hand, the problematizing of the ‘political overgeneralization of the secularized worldview’ generated by the conditions of late modernity (Habermas, 2005: 27; Falk, 2016; Taylor, 2007).

The Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act and the different iterations of the 2001 White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives were in many ways the culmination of the enduring legacy of faith in public in the United States (Tipton, 2007; Wuthnow, 2004). Should the federal government seek to increase the flow of funds to FBOs in an effort to expand the scope of ‘charitable choice’ and ‘level the playing field’ in the competition for public grants? Or is such legislative and administrative action inconsistent with the separation of church and state?

In the context of this polarizing and politically charged debate between the Religious Right and the Secular Left, starting in the mid 1990s and peaking in about 2003 (Bielefeld and Cleveland, 2013), an important body of literature emerged in an attempt to better understand the role of FBOs in community development and social protection (Bane et al., 2000; Bartkowski and Regis, 2003; Cnaan and DiIulio, 2002; Cnaan et al., 1999; Wineburg, 2001). Some of this literature has been criticized for its misguided assumptions about public religion, social welfare, or voluntary associations in the United States (Chaves, 2003; Skocpol, 2000). While others have suggested that too little is still known about the different challenges FBOs face as they strive to build capacity and implement specific initiatives at the local level (Anglin, 2004).

In an effort, to contribute to this field of research and practice, we launched a 3-year initiative at Seattle University that sought to explore how FBOs could more effectively respond to the most pressing social problems impacting Puget Sound and other urban areas across the United States. Oriented by the action research framework, our aim was to generate knowledge, in collaboration with local FBOs and other stakeholders, that could be used to strengthen the capacity of these same FBOs to be better problem solvers, and consequently, to be more effective catalyzers of social change. This knowledge base would then be made available in the classroom to train future religious leaders, urban planners, non-profit executives and policy analysts.

We decided to focus on a specific problem domain – the region’s homelessness crisis. Greater Seattle, which encompasses the three most populous counties in the region, in effect, has been in a homelessness state of emergency since at least 2015; and, moreover, it has, among major US metropolitan areas, the largest share of homeless individuals measured as a percentage of the total population (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). Indeed, as is the case with most of the major West Coast cities, in Seattle, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness has increased directly with the fair market rent, which correspondingly has risen in line with the region’s real gross domestic product (GDP), driven by the growing number of high-income digital workers (Stringfellow and Wagle, 2018). These inequalities that plague Puget Sound and other booming technology hubs have been well documented (Berube, 2018). They seem to epitomize the dilemmas of late-modern urban life in the United States, specifically as it relates to rising income and wealth inequalities, decreasing social mobility, and unequal access to housing, education, and health care (Sachs, 2017; Wacquant, 2009; Wilson, 2012).

Our initiative on FBOs in Greater Seattle comprised two phases: a study of faith-based responses to homelessness across the region and a capacity building pilot with a cohort of local FBOs. Oriented by grounded theory, the study we conducted between the fall of 2016 and the fall of 2018 provided the conceptual underpinnings for the pilot we rolled out between the winter of 2018 and the fall of 2019, following a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach. Having reported on the pilot component elsewhere (Mejido Costoya and Breen, Forthcoming 2021), here we would like to document the main findings of the first phase of our initiative.

This article, then, is divided into two parts, corresponding to the two stages of our study. We will begin by considering the theoretical sampling process we deployed, in and through which emerged a picture of Puget Sound FBOs as community problem solvers. We will then present three comparative case studies we conducted with the aim of achieving greater depth in our theory building.

Faith-based responses to homelessness: four theoretical categories

The purpose of our research was descriptive and not explanatory (King et al., 1994). Our aim was not to test hypotheses, like, for example, ‘FBOs are more effective than nonsectarian organizations in the provision of emergency shelter’. With Glaser and Strauss, our aim, rather, was ‘the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research’ (1967: 2) on the opportunities and constraints faced by FBOs as they strive to address homelessness and revitalize communities around Greater Seattle.

Marshaling a strategy of theoretical sampling, between the fall of 2016 and the fall of 2017, we collected a variety of ‘slices of data’ from the three counties that together comprise the Seattle–Tacoma–Bellevue metropolitan statistical area: namely, King County, which seats the city of Seattle, Snohomish County to the north, and Pierce County to the south. Following the established methodological principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 66), we implemented a ‘multifaceted investigation’ which included the following: (1) a compilation of basic qualitative and quantitative data on the strategies to address homelessness of 139 local FBOs and 29 government agencies and community stakeholders working closely with these FBOs; (2) archival research and site visits to 78 of these organizations; (3) 35 semi-structured interviews with leadership and staff from these organizations; (4) a 1-year focus group around capacity building and innovation with 11 FBO executives and religious leaders; (5) 2, 3-day consultations on FBOs, homelessness and engaged scholarship with a cohort of 14 social scientists and theologians from across the country; and (6) a review of the literature on FBOs and community development in the United States.

Marked by an ‘openness of inquiry’ so as to initially gather as much data as possible across the entire field (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 65), during the early stages of our research, we cataloged the variety of faith-based responses to homelessness across Puget Sound, from vital direct services to broader support, ranging from community organizing and advocacy campaigns, to leadership training and poverty immersion workshops. We also mapped out the government agencies and stakeholders that constitute the region’s homelessness response systems, paying particular attention to partnerships with FBOs.

Through weekly, 3-hour iterations of systematic coding and comparative analysis of the data we collected, as breadth gave way to depth, more substantively we found that, while FBOs across Puget Sound have tended to focus on how to provide for the immediate needs of unhoused individuals, increasingly, they are aspiring to proactively enhance social protection systems and address the systemic causes of homelessness, such as unaffordable housing and precarious employment. Our sampling and analysis eventually yielded four core categories that proved to have the most descriptive power in relation to what emerged as the main puzzle Puget Sound FBOs are grappling with: namely, how to achieve these more ambitious objectives given their limited resources and capacities. Let us now briefly consider the four theoretical categories.

Organizational-institutional analysis

We submit that there is a tendency for the dominant legacy of methodological individualism in the analysis of religion and civic activity in US public life to eclipse the organizational-institutional approach to the role of FBOs in revitalizing local communities.

Through our theoretical sampling, we identified two broad approaches to FBOs and community development, both in the literature and on the ground: One approach considers the role of religious beliefs and practices in fostering civic engagement at the individual level. According to this perspective, religion is positively correlated with volunteering, philanthropy, and being civically active. Religious Americans, the evidence suggests, are more generous neighbors and more conscientious citizens. Inter-subjective networks are the ‘secret ingredient’ that explains the ‘religious edge’ (Putnam and Campbell, 2012). Advanced by, for example, José Casanova (2011: 256) and Nancy Ammerman (2005: 2), another approach argues that, perhaps more than the examination of individual beliefs and practices and the dynamics of face-to-face interaction, the organizational-institutional analysis of FBOs gets to the core of the Tocquevillian thesis we alluded to at the outset – namely, the idea that FBOs in the United States are the prototype of civil and political associations, and, as such, provide a counterfactual case to the European paradigm of secularization.

Given the role of FBOs as civil society organizations (CSOs), it is germane, moreover, that the dominance of methodological individualism has also been lamented in the analysis of civic activity more broadly construed. Marshaling what she refers to as a ‘historical-organizational’ perspective, Theda Skocpol (2003), for example, has suggested that survey-based research and counting group membership does not suffice. One needs to inquire into the ‘organizational capacity’ of the various kinds of associations that have flourished in the United States.

As our fieldwork progressed, we found that the Pacific Northwest is no exception to the Tocquevillian thesis. In this region, too, FBOs significantly contribute to public life. Yet, approaches to religion and society in the Pacific Northwest have tended to give pride of place to methodological individualism over organizational-institutional dynamics. That is, they have tended to focus on individual beliefs and practices in the context of a large ‘unchurched’ population over the contributions the diversity of types of FBOs have made and continue to make to civic life, and to community development initiatives and the social welfare system in particular. For example, one important study provides a

dubious distinction between ‘civic-minded mainline’ and ‘evangelical entrepreneurs’ in assessing the different expressions of faith in public in the region (Killen and Silk, 2004). While the first cluster focuses on providing social services and influencing social policy, the second, it is suggested, focuses on volunteering for community projects on a task- and time-circumscribed basis. A number of the evangelical FBOs we spoke with and visited, like Seattle’s Union Gospel Mission and Everett Gospel Mission, however, do not fit this typology as they are engaged in homelessness-related social service provision, sometimes in partnership with local government, as we will see below. This Weberian schema of correlating religious worldviews and social action, then, is flawed to the extent that it abstracts from the organizational imperatives and resource constraints that different types of FBOs must navigate as the institutional vehicles in and through which communities of faith address social issues.

In our focus group and interviews, moreover, we saw this methodological individualism manifest itself when discussions on the impact of faith-based responses to homelessness were cast by the leadership of FBOs, government agencies and other stakeholders alike, in terms of, for instance, the importance of including a certain charismatic ‘influencer’ in the meeting agenda; or the need to better leverage volunteers; or again, casting members of communities of faith as potential voters or advocates. While these are no doubt important aspects of faith-based initiatives, they should not eclipse the examination of the organizational contexts and dynamics in and through which these aspects take form.

Congregations and faith-based non-profits

We submit that the classification of FBOs in terms of two models – the ‘caring communities’ model exemplified by congregations and the service-organizational model exemplified by arm’s-length non-profits – has much greater descriptive potential for examining the role of these organizations in community development than do other more traditional typologies, such as religious tradition, denominational distinction, and the like.

As our sampling process advanced, we found that more important than, for instance, religious tradition (Jewish/Christian/Muslim), denominational distinction (Catholic/Mainline/Evangelical), or ideals of faith in public (‘social activist’/‘helping neighbor’) (Tipton, 2007), as CSOs that are grappling with how to effectively respond to the homelessness crisis, Puget Sound FBOs are, first and foremost, attempting to navigate two organizational settings: namely, the caring communities model of local congregations and the service-organizational model of arm’s-length faith-based non-profits. The first category includes local churches, mosques, and temples. While the second category includes faith-based service agencies – both those that are incorporated as a 501(c)(3)¹ and those that are under the auspices of a congregation, but operating at arm’s length – as well as denominational, ecumenical, or interreligious advocacy and lobbying organizations.

Caring communities are grounded in a ‘thick’ set of shared values that are developed and nurtured over a long period of time and over a wide range of activities. Having as their primary function prayer and worship, these organizations are relatively ill-equipped to pivot from soul work to social work – that is, from accompaniment of anomic individuals to addressing the material condition of not having shelter. Caring communities often lack the specialized knowledge and resources needed to effectively scale up from

volunteering and philanthropy to the provision of social services and the transformation of unjust systems.

Over half of the approximately 300,000 congregations across the United States cite feeding the hungry – in a homeless shelter, for example – among their four most important social initiatives. While close to 20% mention providing housing or shelter, and 12% mention addressing other homeless needs as one of their top activities (Chaves and Eagle, 2016). Our study of Puget Sound congregations aligns with these national estimates. The data we collected on churches, mosques, and synagogues across the region, moreover, corroborate the wide consensus that exists about the mobilization of volunteers being the most valuable capacity congregations bring to community development. These data also corroborate the observation that the majority of resources marshaled by congregations do not occur through formal programs, but through informal activities such as promoting the value of caring for others through sermons and small groups; creating civic spaces for advocacy and lobbying efforts; and fostering social capital that strengthens the bonds between friends and neighbors and bridges across class, status, and racial-ethnic identity (Wuthnow, 2004).

In contrast to caring communities, service organizations are oriented by ‘thin’, arm’s-length or contractual understandings where social interaction is defined through the circumscribed roles of ‘providers’ and ‘recipients’, or ‘professionals’ and ‘clients’. As they professionalize and bureaucratize, develop their reach and effectiveness, arms-length FBOs come to face a growing tension between efforts to operationalize their religious beliefs and the pressures of instrumental rationality driven by the isomorphisms that structure the field of non-profit organizations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Monsma, 2004). Robert Wuthnow nicely captures this ‘iron-cage’-like dilemma which was conveyed to us by a number of FBO executives and staff from the region, when he observes that, while these service organizations contribute positively to the cultural norms underpinning civil society, ‘they communicate ideals of unconditional love far less often than might be supposed from thinking about these ideals only within the context of religious teachings’ (2004: xvii).

Although more numerous, as social service providers, congregations are trumped by arm’s-length faith-based non-profits. Estimates suggest that there are approximately 6500 faith-based service agencies across the country, contributing about one-fifth of all private social service provision (Wuthnow, 2004); and that faith-based service agencies provide 30% of emergency shelter beds and have the capacity to house more than 150,000 people a night in different types of housing (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017). One study of FBOs and homelessness in 11 US cities found that in Seattle the share of emergency shelter beds provided by faith-based non-profits is 63%, significantly higher than national estimates. Over half of these 2325 beds are provided by three Puget Sound pacesetters we closely studied – namely, Union Gospel Mission (22%), Catholic Community Services (18%), and the Salvation Army (16%) (Johnson et al., 2017).

Aligned with classical sociological oppositions such as community and society, lifeworld and system, each model gives pride of place to a particular understanding of public religion, civil society, and community development, not to mention a specific formulation of the problem domain – homelessness. Due to methodological and theoretical distinctions between, for instance, practical theology and the policy sciences,

the sociology of religion and social work, most of the scholarship has tended to focus exclusively on one of these two models, tacitly or explicitly restricting the term ‘faith-based organization’ to either congregations or arm’s-length non-profits. Thus, for instance, the authors of the aforementioned study on FBOs and homelessness in select US cities acknowledge at the outset of their report that while their research ‘focuses on the reach of faith-based organizations, it is worth noting that it does not include the work of many churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques throughout each city, to provide meals, clothing, furniture, counseling, childcare, transportation and more’ (Johnson et al., 2017: 15). By methodologically excluding congregations, this study misses an important dimension of faith-based response to homelessness.

Civic capacity

We submit that the impact that FBOs have in community development processes has tended to be cast in terms of wielding democratic power through contestation or fostering social capital through deliberative exchanges. Pride of place needs to be given to a third frame of reference: namely, the civic capacity to implement initiatives in collaboration with government and other stakeholders.

As our data collection, coding and analysis honed in on the distinction between congregations and arm’s-length faith-inspired non-profits from an organizational-institutional perspective, it became increasingly apparent that we needed a theoretical category that could capture the challenges these organizations faced as they attempted to address the region’s homelessness crisis, given their capacity constraints, on one hand, and their aspirations for social change, on the other hand. We found such a framework in the notion of ‘collective problem solving’, an analytical tradition in the theory and practice of local democracy, inaugurated by Tocqueville (2000[1835 and 1840]) and developed by the pragmatist tradition, John Dewey (1927) in particular, that pushes beyond the important dynamics of contestation and deliberation, and focuses on how FBOs, deploy their ‘civic capacity’ in collaboration with other stakeholders (Briggs, 2008).

When the frame of reference is democracy as a contest among interest groups, either in the form of elite control or pluralist bargaining, the emphasis is on faith-based community organizing initiatives and coalitions as they strive to reshape government policy through the exercise of participatory democratic practices. As such, FBOs are understood first and foremost as critics of government and social policy rather than as channels for government-funded social services (Wood, 2002). From this perspective, FBOs contribute to ‘democratic renewal’ – to overcoming the democratic deficits and legitimization crisis associated with post-industrial society and the logic of neoliberal urban governance. The community organizing and advocacy campaigns of scores of congregations and arm’s-length faith-based non-profits throughout Puget Sound against the removal of unsanctioned encampments, or for the siting of permanent shelters we documented through our fieldwork are examples of this prophetic, contestatory role of FBOs.

By contrast, when the frame of reference is democracy as a collective process focused on advancing mutual understanding in and through dialogue, transcending strategic action, and open to a process of social learning, pride of place is given to FBOs as ‘schools of citizenship’ that, teaching deliberative rather than purely competitive

behavior, foster civic virtues, and generate social capital, bonds of trust that are the building blocks of resilient communities. Here, drawing on religious worldviews and precepts, with communitarianism and civic republicanism, FBOs contribute to framing homelessness in a manner that challenges liberal–minimalist–institutional arrangements. Caring for the individual experiencing homelessness is never simply a brick and mortar issue. Providing shelter is always linked to the ultimate value of ‘home’ in and through, for instance restoring right relationship, enabling human flourishing, love of neighbor, filial piety, compassion, and the like. In this sense, FBOs also contribute to ensuring that the field of community development is not reduced to a matter of just, for example, creating employment or housing units. The numerous ecumenical and interfaith gatherings and vigils, testimonials and statements against homelessness and in favor of affordable housing organized by FBOs throughout Greater Seattle we documented are examples of deliberative practices and consensus building.

Now, while the role of FBOs as sources of democratic power and social capital – contention and consensus – are vital, they do not get to the core of the practices and processes that constitute community development today. With Xavier Briggs, we submit that the idea of democracy as ‘collective problem solving’ more accurately frames what is involved in community development, especially in the decentralized and pluralistic context of devolution and network governance. Encompassing the dynamics of contestation and deliberation, this frame of reference focuses on the ‘civic capacity’ of FBOs, which is ‘not merely the capacity to set directions collectively but also to devise and implement the means of acting together more effectively, with and beyond government’ (Briggs, 2008: ix). The implementation of a tiny house village, a permanent shelter or a safe-parking program on religious land, or the roll out of resource and referral services by an FBO, are manifestations of civic capacity.

Community problem solvers

We refer to FBOs as ‘community problem solvers’ when framing the local revitalization efforts of these organizations in terms of the civic capacity to experiment with new modalities of catalyzing effective social change. As part of our theory building, with this concept we intend, then, to bring forth what emerged as the most systematic and significant feature of our sampling process: namely, that FBOs are exploring ways of co-producing, together with government and other stakeholders, innovative responses to homelessness. Leveraging opportunities and negotiating constraints through experimentation, congregations, and faith-based non-profits, in different ways, strive to blend local knowledge and professional knowledge (Corburn, 2005), the adaptability of bottom-up civic engagement and the complexities of top-down programming to rethink homelessness interventions (Briggs, 2008). Structuring our field of study in this manner, we identified three main types of interventions in and through which these innovation-driven efforts of FBOs are channeled: (1) community economic development strategies, (2) social service provision, and (3) functioning as intermediaries between governmental and non-governmental actors.

Increasingly across the region, FBOs are engaging in religious land redevelopment for long-term housing solutions as well as the creation of social enterprises to provide job

opportunities for unhoused individuals, in an effort to expand the socioeconomic opportunities in poor or vulnerable neighborhoods, as an alternative to just providing immediate assistance. These community economic development strategies, moreover, allow FBOs to actively co-produce responses, as opposed to serving as mere channels of public and private funding, or as passive implementing partners. For example, Alki United Church of Christ of West Seattle was seeking to scale up a pilot program that builds and situates tiny houses in its land and in a nearby encampment, in partnership with encampment residents, government, and other local stakeholders. St Luke's Episcopal Church in the gentrifying North Seattle neighborhood of Ballard, was exploring how to redevelop their land in order to provide affordable housing and needed community services, including green space and gardening, rainwater capture, community gardening, as well as providing subsidized rental space to support local social businesses. And New Horizon Ministries, a faith-based non-profit in downtown Seattle aligned with the evangelical community, was considering expanding its social business, Street Bean Coffee Roasters, with its focus on job training and employment services for homeless youth.

Like in other parts of the country, Puget Sound FBOs face challenges and opportunities due to their growing efforts in patching what is perceived to be an inadequate and ineffective social safety net (Warren et al., 2019). In this context of devolution, FBOs are exploring ways to improve the targeting, delivery, coherence, and effectiveness of social services along the continuum of care, from prevention and outreach to housing and employment. For instance, east of Tacoma, Puyallup Nazarene Church was seeking to scale up its pilot Wrap-Up initiative through a partnership with a local service agency – Network Tacoma – to pair relationship focused volunteers together with professional social workers with the aim of increasing the resiliency of newly housed individuals and families. The Bridge Care Center, the social outreach arm of Quest Church, an evangelical congregation in the neighborhood of Ballard, was exploring ways to take to scale a reinsertion pilot program called Advocates Representing the Community, which provides unhoused individuals with the resources and support they need to move toward greater stability. And Muslim Housing Services were considering rolling out a culturally and linguistically appropriate job placement program in an effort to increase the stability and resiliency of the Seattle and King County homeless families it supports, the majority of which are refugees and first- or second-generation immigrants.

The larger, more established arm's-length faith-based non-profits, in particular, play an important role as intermediaries between government and stakeholders as well as among congregations. In this twofold go-between role, these organizations seek to enhance governmental and non-governmental action as well as coordinate the structured participation of congregations. This is more about FBOs striving to become hubs of communities of practice, than about their potential contribution to community economic development or social service innovation. The three case studies we will now consider examine this role of FBOs as intermediaries.

FBOs as intermediaries: three case studies

With the aim of deepening our emergent theory, between the winter of 2017 and the fall of 2018, we conducted three case studies of initiatives that were currently being rolled out by

Puget Sound faith-based non-profits in an effort to foster greater synergies between governmental and non-governmental responses to homelessness. As is typical in small-N research, our sampling logic was guided by our analytical aims, the potential of ‘structured focused comparisons’, and an emphasis on ‘extreme situations’ where the process in question is ‘transparently observable’ (Eisenhardt, 2002: 6–7; King et al., 1994: 43–46).

In broad strokes, our sampling strategy was as follows: We began by selecting the most innovative of the Puget Sound faith-based initiatives we had cataloged during the first stage of our research. We then tabulated this subset of initiatives by the FBO typology and the three intervention types we identified in the previous section. From here, we selected the most promising three cases, namely, the Network Builders program of Catholic Community Services of Western Washington, King County in particular; the interfaith and cross-sectoral campaign against family homelessness spearheaded by Associated Ministries of Tacoma-Pierce County; and the Para-Navigator partnership between Everett Gospel Mission and the municipal government of Snohomish County.

In terms of our data collection method, we triangulated informant interviews,² with participant observation of relevant meetings and events, as well as archival research. And we based our descriptive generalizations on cross-case patterns derived from the analysis of the transcripts and write-ups of our within-case data (Eisenhardt, 2002). In the limited space available, we will now sketch the main contours of these three case studies.

Catholic Community Services of Western Washington’s (CCSWW) network builder initiative

In 1979, at the time of his appointment, Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen mandated the then and current president of CCSWW – Michael Reichert – to unite, organize, and develop the five Catholic Charities agencies across its jurisdiction. These agencies had emerged from local efforts to aid the poor, and, by the end of the 1970s, operated with a combined budget of US\$4 million and a staff of approximately 200 people.

In the 40 years since, these regional efforts have been developed into one of the most established and well-resourced FBOs in the state of Washington, if not the United States. CCSWW, and its sister agency, Catholic Housing Services (CHS), now employ 3636 staff and 9011 volunteers and command a total budget of US\$176 million, 76% of which originates from government contracts. In terms of homelessness services in King, Snohomish, and Pierce Counties, CCSWW-CHS operates 2356 affordable housing units and five family centers that provide navigation to shelter and other services, and is a primary partner in each county’s mandated homeless response system through their joint administration and operation of the Coordinated Entry System, emergency shelters, and significant rapid rehousing dollars.

Despite having apparently fulfilled his mandate through this growth and consolidation of Catholic Charities, Reichert has, in recent years, begun to question the organization’s impact. In the face of persistent and increasing homelessness across the region he has suggested that, in fact, the agency’s development has come at the expense of vulnerable communities and their ability to solve problems at the local level. Accordingly, in the early 2000s, in an effort to develop more grassroots responses, Reichert instructed CCSWW

leadership to figure out how they might bring CCSWW resources more effectively to bear in support of parish-led responses to problems like homelessness. The Network Builder initiative emerged in this context.

Mary Wahl, CCSWW Network Builder for the Northwest, assesses the particular value of parish-led responses this way:

Parishes have historically proven to be champions for those needing emergency assistance and a safe, supportive environment. They are the primary players within the Catholic system when it comes to creating responses to the poor and homeless, and must thus be at the community table for conversations and planning.

At the same time, she also notes that the particular skills CCSWW offers would be better leveraged if it could find a way to partner more effectively with parishes: 'CCSWW has proven skills for community project management, an understanding of community services coordination, experience providing services, knowledge of funding sources, and decades of being at the community table for conversations and collaboration'.

But, notes Patty Repikoff, Director of the Network Builder initiative, there is a problematic fragmentation between these two arms of the Catholic response to social problems: 'CCSWW was formed out of parishes and out of the parish need', she explains, 'and over 100 years, [CCSWW] has gotten huge and [. . .] really lost contact with the parishes'. Local church leaders and members express frustration, she reports, at the difficulties they experience accessing help when a need arises, and there is concern among parishes that CCSWW, with an increasingly non-Catholic staff, significant government funding, and secular feel, is not 'really Catholic'.

In response to these dynamics, CCSWW developed the role of Network Builder within a larger response called the Catholic Initiative for Poor Families and Communities. In November 2017, three regional Network Builders, recruited for their knowledge of the Catholic Church as much as their experience in social services, began their work rebuilding relationship with parishes. These Network Builders, Wahl suggests, 'bring CCSWW skills and support to the local church as a technical adviser, an intermediary, a conveyor, and a facilitator in order to implement solutions rooted in the community'.

Wahl's work at St Pius X Church in Mountlake Terrace, Snohomish County, is held up by CCSWW as emblematic of the type of results this initiative aims to produce. Early in her tenure as Network Builder, Wahl met with Fr Cal Christiansen, one of the priests at St. Pius X Church, who explained his congregation's desire to develop resources for parish volunteers struggling to help homeless and vulnerable neighbors within a chronically under-resourced social service system. The parish wanted to develop affordable housing on two acres of land next to the church, as well as renovate a large property to house critical support services. Wahl facilitated a planning and implementation process that encouraged the parish to look for partners outside of the Catholic system. Conversations ensued with representatives from the local foodbank, city, and county government, Everett Gospel Mission, the local hospital district and housing providers. Through these efforts, the group decided to embark upon the support services project as the most helpful first step and developed a plan whereby St Vincent de Paul and Pregnancy and Parenting Support (PREPARES), two service providers within the Catholic system, would operate from the newly renovated building.

The CCSWW leadership believes that the Network Builder initiative will be successful only if there is support from the wider Catholic system. CCSWW understands that, without the backing and buy-in of local bishops, priests and Catholic partner agencies like St Vincent de Paul, this effort cannot gain traction at the parish level. After focusing on securing early backing at the Archdiocesan level and then with local priests like Fr Christiansen helping to generate tangible projects, CCSWW is now starting to roll out new staff in support of smaller clusters of parishes where energy and needs are presenting themselves.

Associated Ministries (AM) of Tacoma-Pierce County's campaign to end family homelessness

Emerging out of the ecumenical movement over a century ago, and incorporated as a non-profit in 1969, AM has been exploring for some time now, leveraging its traditional role as convener of over 250 local congregations through a campaign to end family homelessness in the city of Tacoma, the seat of Pierce County.

During AM's early years, social programs were developed under the shared ownership of member churches. Eventually, as these programs developed, they would become independent non-profits. In the last few decades, however, AM moved away from incubating new non-profits and instead intentionally developed in-house programming. In the last 10 years, the primary focus of this programming has been on homelessness. Accordingly, AM had to develop the specialized technical competencies needed to support the funding and execution of this model of service delivery. With 81% of their US\$3 million revenue in 2017 originating in contracts for four city and county government programs integral to the countywide response to homelessness, it would seem they have reached some level of success in this intended development.

In August 2015, AM's Board of Directors saw a troublesome disconnection with their traditional base, the faith community, and instructed their new Executive Director, Michael Yoder – ironically, the first director not to be an ordained pastor – to strengthen the ties with local congregations. Yoder saw an important opportunity to turn AM's attention toward their historical connections and deepen their commitment to interfaith work. He explains,

We are not correcting a wrong. AM's program development is not a problem that has to be fixed. In fact, it has built valuable expertise and stability and has given Associated Ministries a place at the table with government and other agencies.

But, he goes on to say,

if we [AM] could turn our hearts back to our historic role of convening faith communities and add their voice and assets, their hidden muscle, to the community conversation, we would have the potential to really make a difference in ending homelessness.

AM has thus, in recent years, attempted to develop strategies to integrate local congregations into its work on homelessness. The most visible initiative is a quarterly

meeting of faith communities, five of which have been convened by AM since 2017. The aim of these meetings is to educate congregations on issues related to homelessness, provide updates on current interventions and generate possible projects. AM reports the presence of 80 local faith community members representing 54 communities, including a number of non-Christian traditions, at their March 2018 meeting.

Beyond coordinating AM's more programmatic and visible efforts to strengthen ties with local communities of faith, Yoder spends time attending Ministerial Alliance meetings, visiting congregations, and engaging in individual conversation with faith leaders. Based on these interactions, he reports that communities of faith see the potential for congregational revitalization, if they could find a way to respond tangibly to homelessness in their neighborhoods. But, he says, these churches need support, a road map, and technical assistance. With a city council and press asking the church community to respond urgently and practically to homelessness, and with the precedent of Graduate Tacoma, a campaign that brought the community around local schools to elevate Tacoma schools' graduation rates, Yoder believes AM is well-positioned as an intermediary that could mobilize local congregations around a cross-sector movement focused on ending family homelessness in Tacoma and Pierce County.

However, even with a plan on paper for a campaign structure, a budget, and possible funding sources, AM has not been able to fully implement this initiative. While CCSWW was able to leverage institutional infrastructure and resources to build bridges between the arm's-length and congregational energy, AM must rely on the looser ties of their ecumenical heritage and interfaith connections to bring religious communities around this initiative. AM knows that it needs a dedicated staff to communicate, build, and generate buy-in and shepherd projects at the congregational level. Yet, in contrast with CCSWW, it finds itself faced with arguably the most difficult task of having to develop new funds from non-sectarian community partners to put these staff in place.

Everett Gospel Mission (EGM) and Snohomish County partnership to roll out Para-Navigators

Opening its doors in 1961, a member of the Citygate Network (formally the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions), EGM provides shelter and comprehensive recovery services to over 200 individuals each night. Its historical focus on personal piety and the rescue of 'broken' souls manifest themselves in EGM's funding and programming in a couple of important ways. In 2017, only 7% of EGM's US\$4.6 million revenue came from local government sources. With this funding, EGM offers services primarily to chronically homeless adults, the section of the population the leadership deems are most destitute and chronically underserved. While it has extended its services to include shelter, day services, and recovery programs for single men and women, and single women with children, EGM remains dedicated to its original mission of rescuing homeless men.

In a departure from a pietistic understanding of social reform, EGM has chosen to train staff and volunteers in a way that challenges somewhat the assumption that poverty is all about individual responsibility. Sylvia Anderson, EGM's CEO, reports that she is not like other Gospel Mission leaders – not just, she says, as an African American Woman, but also in her view on the causes of poverty and her rejection of a 'bootstraps

approach'. She believes that the role of the mission is less to 'save' the lost by asking for an individual recommitment to more pious practices, and rather, it is to understand fully the stories of those the mission serves – the structural barriers they face as well as their personal challenges – and then to come alongside them to build strengths and develop strategies to overcome these barriers.

With this in mind, she and her Director of Strategic Initiatives, John Hull, developed a training program that helps staff and volunteers understand more fully the experience of those without resources as they navigate banking, housing, education, and even social welfare systems. In the last 5 years, they have extended the reach of their training program and have delivered it to a number of churches alongside a secular version that has been delivered in Everett Public Schools, local government, and with first responders. As they have been approached to run these training in the community, EGM has crossed paths with and become a resource to local government officials.

One of these officials is Alessandra Durham, a senior analyst for the Snohomish County Executive. In November 2017, Durham convened a Faith Leaders' Roundtable with the initial purpose of 'getting to know the faith community and finding out from them what they needed'. It was clear, Durham says, that there was a significant level of frustration at the lack of resources and a desire to do something about the poor navigability of the resources that were available as faith communities tried to help community members in need. The group explored how local congregations might become better equipped, and at that point, in early 2018, Snohomish County turned to EGM to ask them to develop their existing training as a way to respond to this question.

Snohomish County asked EGM to prepare a proposal with a view to funding training sessions for the faith community and other interested groups that would place Para-Navigators in congregations and other accessible community spaces. These Para-Navigators would serve as community referral liaisons that navigate homeless individuals and families through the human services system and toward the support and stability they need. The proposal develops EGM's existing poverty immersion curriculum into a series of up to four half-day workshops designed to train potential navigators about the factors causing poverty, how to more effectively assess need and then how to support system navigation.

These workshops also provide more advanced sessions aimed at congregations who might want to develop more programmatic responses. These sessions are designed to help organizational leadership provide services that align with their organizational goals, as well as assess the relative value and mechanics of programs that focus on providing immediate relief, housing, financial literacy support, or job insertion. The proposal presented also notes the hope that, as this training builds a constituency of participants with some common language and understanding, resiliency, and the ability to problem-solve locally in the face of limited resources will be increased.

John Hull suggests that EGM is especially well-positioned to support this work, not only because they had a curriculum ready to develop, or that they had credibility as a front line organization, but because, given their ties to the Evangelical community, they could help extend the reach of this initiative to more communities of faith. The Snohomish County government values EGM's role in channeling the participation of local congregations. As Durham observes,

This is about equipping and empowering the faith community because they know their people better than I ever will and they do this work every day. [. . .] But they have had to do it in a way that is incredibly frustrating [. . .] and so, it's about making sure the tools and education are in place for them to do their part.

Conclusion

That CSOs play an important intermediary role in community improvement efforts has been well documented (Briggs, 2008). Yet, as we learned through our fieldwork, as go-betweens, faith-based non-profits have an additional value added that stems from their capacity to, on one hand, link government, civil society, business, and other stakeholders to the resources and knowledge rooted in local congregations; and on the other hand, network and pool congregational resources and knowledge to channel the structured participation of these faith communities into initiatives like enhancing social service provision, building affordable housing, creating social enterprises, and the like.

Cast as a puzzle, CCSWW's Network Builders program, AM's family homelessness campaign, and EGM's Para-Navigator project – but also the initiatives of other faith-based non-profits across Puget Sound, like Everett Gospel Mission, the Church Council of Greater Seattle, and Compass Housing Alliance – are essentially about how to continue to marshal the expertise and top-down programming that make them legitimate go-betweens across governmental and non-governmental sectors, while at the same time, function as stewards of community resources and local knowledge in a way that is considered legitimate to rabbis, imams, pastors, priests, and other congregational leaders, not to mention the members of these respective faith communities.

At the cost of distancing themselves from congregations, in the age of devolution and network governance, these large FBOs have come to establish themselves as primary partners in homeless response systems throughout Puget Sound. The leaders of these FBOs are considered to be invaluable interlocutors by high-level municipal officials and grass-tops from across the region. Now the question these same leaders are exploring is how to become incubators of congregationally anchored responses that include, but cannot be reduced to, mobilizing volunteers, or developing traditional advocacy campaigns. It was no doubt an encouraging sign that through the course of our fieldwork, we witnessed promising conversations emerge between these larger FBOs and a number of congregations that were grappling with how to contribute in a substantial way to addressing the homelessness crisis in Greater Seattle, given their limited capacity and expertise.

The three case studies we have just considered were part of a 2-year effort at theory building around the role of FBOs as community problem solvers – that is, as CSOs that are experimenting with innovative local revitalization strategies. Future research would need to continue to populate, with case studies like these, the two-by-three matrix we adumbrated above (where the FBO typology constitutes one axis and the intervention types the other). Indeed, additional descriptive work would render more promising explanatory research on FBO responses to homelessness and other complex social problems. We, however, as suggested at the outset, opted to move in another direction. We used the grounded theory presented here as the conceptual underpinnings for a

CBPR-oriented pilot that sought to strengthen the civic capacity of FBOs to be more effective catalyzers of social change.

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Notes

1. That is, a non-profit or charitable organization that is exempt from federal income tax under Section 501(c)(3) of the US Internal Revenue Code.
2. All interviewees provided informed consent and granted us permission to disclose their identities. Interviews for these case studies were conducted between September and December of 2018.

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