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Maintaining Vital Connections between Faith Communities and Their Organizations: Brief Summary

The Faith and Organizations project has received funding from the Lilly Endowment to assist faith communities in maintaining connections to the non-profits they create. We seek faith communities and organizations to participate in the project. Participation would involve hosting a researcher who would 1) develop a history of the faith community's social welfare, health, senior services and education activities through non-profits, 2) interview key people involved with stewardship of organizations, and 3) observe meetings and events associated with faith community connections to their organizations. We are seeking congregations, higher level religious institutions (Yearly Meetings, archdiocese, synods, conferences, Federations), and faith based organizations to participate in the project. Organizations can also participate in a second phase of the project that would involve testing a self-assessment instrument on stewardship and a small number of interviews and focus groups. For more information, contact Jo Anne Schneider at jschneider@anth.umd.edu or 301.405.7121 or see the project website at:

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Background: Scholars of social welfare in the United States have long recognized that much of the U.S. social welfare and health systems was founded by faith communities and religions also played a key role in education. Faith communities continue to have ties to the organizations they founded today, as well as starting new initiatives. However, in some cases the relationship between founding faith communities and organizations has become attenuated or unclear. Despite faith community interest in strengthening the connection between faith and works for religious institutions, few studies have focused on faith community connections to the non-profits they create.

The Faith and Organizations project was created in order to remedy this situation by providing concrete data on the relationship between faith communities and their organizations as well as practical guidance and tools based on this research. The project is unique because it explores the role of specific religion's and denominations' theology and religious culture in service activities, providing concrete products specific both to that religion as well as more general theologically grounded materials. To date, the project has completed a pilot study: home.gwu.edu/~jschneid). This new project continues work on this issue from the perspective of faith communities by exploring ways that practical theology plays out in stewardship of non-profits created by mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, Peace Churches, Catholics, Jews, and African American Christians.

We define stewardship as the faith community's effort to maintain its practical theology of justice and charity in the activities of the non-profits affiliated with that religion or denomination. Practical theology means the every day actions that carry out that faith's beliefs regarding justice, charity and social equity. This project's primary goals involve 1) documenting ways that faith communities maintain connections to their organizations and 2) providing practical advice on ways to strengthen stewardship or discern appropriate actions regarding organizations no longer practicing the practical theology of that religion. The project explores three questions:

1. How do faith communities understand their practical theology, regarding work in the world, and how does that practical theology play out in stewardship of organizations?
2. How does stewardship differ among the various branches of Christianity (mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, Peace Churches, Catholics, African American churches) and Jews?
3. What strategies can a faith community use to address concerns regarding the faith base in organizations under its care or affiliated with that religion?

Products: As a research/practice project, this study will produce a combination of applied products for faith communities and organization boards as well as academic and practitioner publications. An advisory committee drawn from hosting faith communities and faith based organizations, the Faith and Organizations Project advisory committee, and dissemination partners will be developed early in the project and meet regularly during the research project to discuss preliminary findings and determine specific products from the project. Products may include a mix of, but are not limited to: 1) a formal report on the study, 2) one dissemination event on the project as a whole, 3) a self assessment instrument for faith communities and organizations on stewardship, 4) a series of brief publications and factsheets with best practices and guidelines for stewardship for faith community members and organizations, 5) webinar and/or seminar curricula on stewardship for specific audiences, 6) one book for practitioners and several applied articles, 7) brief video educational materials, 8) academic articles and presentations.

