

Strategies for Faith-Based Organizations: Staffing Decisions



Patterns of hiring by faith-based organizations

Faith communities look to FBOs to carry out their works of charity and justice in a way that that reflects their faith-based ethos, goals and values. Agency staff, particularly executive leadership, are key instruments in faithfully implementing this mission. But how that faithfulness may be expressed in an FBO's staffing decisions is quite variable. It is important for each nonprofit to consider carefully how religion factors into its staffing decisions, both formally and informally. This resource is intended to help in that assessment and self-reflection. When and how should a FBO consider a religious preference in staff selection? How can staffing decisions reinforce a nonprofit's faith-based identity, values and mission?

The role of religion in hiring is affected by the formal policies of the organization, by the organization's connections with the faith community, and by the nature of the position and the service provided. Our study observed that in most service-oriented nonprofits, most staff positions are filled without formal regard to religion or from a wide range of religious backgrounds. Other nonprofits, particularly those in the Evangelical or some African American communities as well as organizations with a mission of religiously-based education, prefer many or all staff positions to be filled from within their religious tradition.

Another important overall observation is that for certain key positions—executive directors and directors of development—hiring someone who is from the sponsoring religion, or at least is comfortably familiar with it, is very important in maintaining strong connections with the faith community. These leaders set the tone and direction for the organization, are the primary contacts with the board and other staff, and serve as liaison with the broader faith community. Many nonprofits have different policies regarding religion for key leaders than for other staff.

A third main theme is that regardless of formal hiring policies, religion tends to influence hiring patterns in informal ways. Faith-based dynamics may be embedded in who applies for FBO positions, and how they view their work; in the agency's mission or core values that staff are expected to affirm; and in the general organizational culture that determines which staff make a good "fit." As an interviewee at a Mainline Protestant organization explains, "Many of us have come out of their faith commitment to do what they are doing. Their job may be secular in

This resource offers guidance for faith-based organizations (FBOs) on hiring staff from the faith community (e.g. members of a particular congregation, denomination or faith tradition). It is designed for staff and board members of FBOs, as well as leaders in the faith community, and organizations that resource and train FBOs. This resource focuses specifically on staffing issues for FBOs that involve its relationship with the faith community. We outline key findings about the range of ways that FBO hiring practices can strengthen connections with their faith community, so that the work of the organization can thrive.

We do not address the legal aspects of hiring decisions in this resource. For commentary on the legal issues, as well as more general advice on nonprofit staffing concerns, see the list of recommended resources on the Faith and Organizations Project website, www.faithandorganizations@umd.edu

nature, it may be public funding so they don't do religious activities, but these are people who are here because they have a sense of calling."

Three case studies illustrate the variety within this overview of hiring patterns:

- ❖ Asked if they had religious requirements for staff positions, the executive director of Union Bethel AME Church's CDC (community development corporation) emphasized, "No. That would be discriminatory. What we require of our staff is that they have credentials that are necessary to perform the function for what they are being hired." For programs directly sponsored by the church, however, a different set of criteria is applied. "Our school and our Child Learning Center, those are Christian-based programs. The expectation is that you will be able to roll out a Christian curriculum within those. In our after school program, however, it is not like that—so it depends on which program."
- ❖ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service has no explicit religious preference in hiring. A staff person whose job involves interactions with churches commented, "I think it is perhaps a secondary consideration. I have been impressed with the quality of staff here, so I know they always put skills and experience first. Some of those people have also brought with them a faith background that has added to our strength. In my position it was important to be Lutheran but not a requirement. It is preferred because it makes developing those relationships a little easier." Although people often assume that all staff are from the faith community, only about ten percent of the staff are estimated to be Lutheran. Another key staff person, who is not a Lutheran, reflects: "I think that [not being Lutheran] is an awkwardness at the level of leadership that I hold."
- ❖ At Krieger Schechter Day School, a Jewish institution, a key staff person explains that the religious background of key staff is "only important to the extent that their job duties relate to religious instruction. So for example, if I had two people, both of whom were equally qualified to supervise general studies and one of them had a wonderful Jewish background—I would want that person. If I want to enrich the general studies program with Judaic concepts it certainly is helpful for a person who oversees general studies to have that background." An estimated 90 percent of teachers are Jewish; secretaries and support staff are about 50 percent Jewish. "The non-Jewish teachers are mostly in our specialist staff; for example, three out of four of our gym teachers are not Jewish." When asked directly if Jews are given preference in recruitment or hiring, this staff person summarized: "When it comes to general studies, the answer is no. When it comes to Judaic studies, the answer is yes."

As the above examples demonstrate, each nonprofit is unique. Each FBO has a different set of hiring needs in relation to the work of the organization, its linkages with a supporting religious community, and its religious mission.

Options for taking religion into account in staff selection

As noted above, religion is not a stated factor in hiring decisions for many nonprofit staff positions. In some cases, neutrality toward religion in hiring is a condition imposed from outside the organization, as is sometimes required when a position is funded by government or a secular funder. It can also flow from an organization's religious values. For example, the Mainline community cherishes a tradition of open-mindedness, religious tolerance, appreciation of diversity, and ecumenism. These values typically lead Mainline nonprofits to embrace professional qualifications over faith affiliation for most staff positions, and to reject what they see as religious discrimination.

When FBOs do decide to take religion into account, they have a range of options available. They can make religious affiliation a requirement, a preference, or one factor among many that is considered. They can give preference based on belonging to a particular religious group or denomination (e.g., a Catholic school that hires only Catholic teachers), or affiliation with a religious tradition in a broad sense (e.g., an ecumenical organization that prefers leaders who self-identify as a Christian or as a person of faith). Organizations can also seek applicants who share certain values or worldviews (e.g., the social gospel tradition or pro-life values) that are compatible with their religious culture. At a minimum the FBO may want to know that an applicant is familiar with the sponsoring faith tradition and willing to be identified with it. Often these preferences are not formalized policies but unwritten expectations.

Many FBOs give special consideration to religious connections in hiring executive leadership positions. Leaders set the agenda and model the values for the organization that can reflect a faith perspective. Because top leaders hire other staff, their values become reinforced throughout the organization. Executive leadership also is responsible for maintaining key contacts with the board and other parts of the faith community. Moreover, the director often is the public "face" of the organization, affecting how the world perceives its religious character. Thus many FBOs seek an executive director and other key leaders who share the organization's religious affiliation, or who at least can represent it faithfully.

Other job descriptions may also be more likely to take religion into account. For example, as one Jewish nonprofit leader stated, "Our manager of communications is not Jewish, our chief financial officer is not Jewish—I don't see any particular reason that we would need to have Jewish people in those slots." On the other hand, "Our current director of development is Jewish and is very well steeped, probably the most Jewishly educated of our staff." He went on to explain that the development director's contacts in the Jewish community were perhaps even more important than her Jewish background; being well respected and known in the community made a significant difference in fundraising. Former development staff who were not Jewish had lacked either the cultural background or connections to effectively do the job. In general, the more an agency relies on the faith community for support, the more important it may be to hire certain positions from within the faith community in order to reinforce this connection.

Other factors in the staff selection process can also lead indirectly to the hiring of personnel with a religious connection. Regardless of whether religion is a stated preference, individuals in a faith community often end up on a FBO staff because they have heard about the opening through religious channels of communication, they have previously volunteered at the agency through their faith community, they have sought out an employer who shares their religious values and sense of mission, or they know other staff members from their faith network. For example, the administrator at one Evangelical urban ministry notes, "We don't really have a fancy process. ... Usually they're people who know someone who knows someone who gets recommended here." FBOs tend to trust that if applicants support the mission of the nonprofit, or are recommended by someone already connected with the nonprofit, their religious orientation will be compatible.

Thus while church membership was not a formal, written requirement in any of the African American agencies or programs we studied, there was a consistent overlap among agency leadership and board members with persons who were also worshipping members of the original faith community. This reflects the important role of the Black church in empowering the community as well as distinctive leadership dynamics in African American culture. Staffing policies need to take such informal factors into account.

How the faith community may be involved with staff selection

Ties between an agency and its sponsoring faith community are strengthened when the faith community participates in the process of recruiting or selecting staff (even when religion is not an overt preference in staff selection).

A FBO may turn to the faith community to **supply potential applicants**. A Jewish school advertises openings in Jewish newspapers. Quaker schools publicize job openings through an umbrella agency, the Friends Council on Education. Many Evangelical FBOs rely on word of mouth among faith-based networks to spread the news about job openings. Congregations provide another vehicle for recruitment. At one Evangelical relief organization, for example, "The word gets out to [our denominational] circles that there is a need to fill. ... The word goes out to the churches, through the delegates and through the board members that we have a need. 'Do you have somebody in your congregation?' That would be the first way to go."

The sponsoring faith community can also be consulted to **make or approve staffing decisions**. In agencies that spin off from a congregation, the pastor or a church leadership board may have a say in staff selection. More indirectly, the church may appoint the board members, who then help select the staff. In the more centralized Jewish context, the JCCA, a national organization, is responsible for screening most executive placements for Jewish Community Centers. The Federation, the local planning and fundraising umbrella for Jewish agencies, may also take part in the search process by submitting candidates to the local organization for the final selection. One Federation participating in our study had representatives on the hiring committee for executive director positions at all member agencies. The faith community tends to be most directly involved with the process of selecting the top leadership positions.

The faith community can also **guide the values and criteria for staff selection**. In one African American church, for example, the pastor stated she is committed to "hiring developmentally," reflecting the value this culture places on leadership development. Quaker community leaders wanted organizational leaders whose style of management and communication was consistent with Quaker values. In other contexts, interviews with religious leaders indicated their priority was to hire someone with the most effective skills to carry out their faith-driven social goals.

The involvement of the faith community in the recruitment and hiring process has several important implications. First, it makes both agency and faith community more invested in their relationship. Second, it increases the likelihood that staff will come from the faith community, or be networked with people in the faith community (though it is not always the case that a staff candidate recommended by a religious body will be from that faith community). Third, the values and culture of a faith tradition will be reflected indirectly in the process. For example, the role of personal connections in drawing many Evangelical staff underscores the relational character of Evangelical culture. The centralized search process for Jewish executives highlights the importance of each agency seeing itself as part of a larger Jewish community.

Advantages of hiring staff from the sponsoring faith community

One factor to consider in determining hiring preferences is how staff from the faith community may contribute uniquely to an agency. Our research pointed to five ways that the faith of staff may be considered an asset.

1. *Faith-based staff can help a nonprofit obtain resources.* Staff from the sponsoring faith community can serve as a bridge for the flow of resources of donations and volunteers to the agency, especially in leadership or development positions. They also bring their networking connections to expand the agency's base of credibility and support.
2. If the nonprofit primarily serves people from a particular religious community, *clients may be more comfortable with staff from that community.* The Krieger Schechter Day School, for example, values having a Jewish admissions staff person to promote their program, because "one of the things that she or he will be selling is our Jewish program and the Jewish values that we represent."
3. *Faith-based staff can help maintain ties with the religious community.* Faith-based staff bring with them the history, guidance, expectations, and values of their faith tradition. They represent the faith community's interests to the agency, and also help keep the goals and activities of the agency fresh in the attention of the faith community.

Organizational leaders play a particularly important role in maintaining these connections. For example, Georgetown Prep High School's choice to hire only Catholic headmasters has reinforced its strong relationships with the Jesuits and with an extensive network of alumni from Catholic institutions. On the other hand, organizations that did not hire a director from the faith community sometimes struggled to maintain these ties. For example, hiring a non-Quaker as executive director at American Friends Service Committee ended up generating conflicts and misunderstandings; the next time, they intentionally chose a Quaker.

4. *Faith-based staff can help a nonprofit fulfill the religious dimension of its service.* In some cases the faith of staff may be seen as vital to the mission or desired outcomes of the organization. In the Evangelical context, faith-based staff can provide religious education and spiritual nurture, support religious activities such as prayer, and witness verbally to their faith. For FBOs that do not sponsor explicitly religious activities, including many Mainline Protestant and Catholic groups, faith-based staff can embody or exemplify a set of religiously-grounded values such as promoting economic justice or being pro-life.

One example of an organization in which Christian faith is integral to the job description comes from an urban ministry in Washington, D.C. One of the ministry's founders describes the focus of his work: "My role is to be a presence for Jesus in the neighborhood. ... 'What would Jesus do?' is the question that we ask ourselves." Another staff member comments, "Here everybody interprets [the nonprofit's goals] differently in how they are going to be involved, but they know that we are about who Jesus is about." The work of staff is inseparable from their faith.

5. *Faith-based staff can help sustain an organizations' religious identity.* Having a religious identity can be important to an agency even if it is not openly talked about or enforced. FBOs often reflect the religious culture of their sponsoring faith community in informal ways, such as the way staff handle conflict or make decisions. When staff share religiously grounded values and find common spiritual meanings in their work, this can promote a strong sense of bonding and common purpose.

The interviewee at Rock Creek Quaker School helps to explain the connection between agency identity and the faith orientation of staff (emphasis added):

We look at it as a plus for a potential employee to be a Quaker or to be familiar with Quakerism because we think it means they understand who we are; they will bring their own experience with Quakerism to their work. So it's absolutely a positive for us, both in the admissions process and the hiring process, [to have] people who are Quakers and have spent time in Quaker meetings or schools. ... Our mission involves being a Quaker school, and therefore, if at any time what you're doing seems to not take that into account or run contrary to that, it's an issue. ... That's kind of a self-reinforcing element of the culture that certain kinds of behaviors would feel very much out of place here. Many of those are behaviors that run contrary to Quaker values.

Advantages of hiring staff from *outside* the sponsoring faith community

Sometimes it may be in the best interest of a FBO to hire someone from a different faith background, or of no faith affiliation. Possible reasons include: broadening the pool of qualified applicants; prioritizing job skills or experience; tapping into a non-religious professional network; serving a religiously diverse clientele; expanding the base of potential supporters; following the hiring policies of a particular funder; developing an ecumenical or interfaith partnership; seeking diversity in the religious culture or worldview of the organization; building a reputation for being non-sectarian; or intentionally shifting the religious identity of the organization.

Examples of religious diversification include:

- ❖ A ministry leader at Northwood Appold United Methodist Church, an African American congregation, stresses that the practical dynamic outweighed any religious consideration when it came to her own hiring: "I could have gone to a Baptist church, I could have gone to a Catholic Church, I could have gone to a Muslim church—[the director] still would have hired me because he was looking for somebody that had what I had for the job."
- ❖ A Pregnancy Help Center has a strong Evangelical character and hires only Christians; yet the director values the fact that staff come from diverse church settings, including Baptist, Methodist, Catholic and nondenominational. "It's a positive in the sense that it brings a good variety," she remarks. This diversity functions to bring staff together around the core faith elements they have in common: pro-life values, compassion for women and children, and a commitment to evangelism.
- ❖ A key staff person at the Jewish Council for the Aging notes that non-Jews have an increasing presence on staff. "When I came to JCA, the management of the organization was overwhelmingly Jewish; now it is much more mixed. The front line workers were always a mixed group. I would say that we are much more vocal with the Jewish people about how very non-sectarian our services are."
- ❖ St. Ambrose Center, a Jesuit-founded housing agency that no longer maintains formal religious ties, finds that the perception of being a Catholic agency sometimes deters non-Catholic clients and job applicants. An interviewee explains that the urgency of meeting the growing need is their main criteria. "We are hiring people with technical skills. ... There is no time right now. We need people who really understand the nuts and bolts."

Transparency and communication

At one Jewish Community Center, a special effort is made to communicate the agency's religious identity and values to the small minority of staff members who are not Jewish. The

president explains, "Where we have at times hired non-Jews ... is our Health and Fitness Department. There you hire for the skill. That said, we are very, very clear in our hiring that you are coming to work for a Jewish organization. ... In the past years we have had classes [on] customs and all that kind of stuff. It is basically helping them learn what the culture is."

At Catholic Charities in D.C., where up to 90 percent of staff are not Catholic, communication about the faith nature of the organization is equally important. According to one key staff member, "Staff are advised when they come that this is an organization with a Catholic identity, and as part of their positions they must support life as the church does, from conception to natural death. ... They all know this is a God-centered agency; our mission statement, everything we do has the face of the church on it, and most people are quite supportive of that."

These examples illustrate the value of being transparent to prospective staff about the agency's faith-based identity and providing new staff with an orientation to the agency's religious history and culture. FBOs should also articulate personnel policies that relate to faith, when applicable. Staff should know what is expected of them in terms of representing the religious character of the organization (e.g., dress, lifestyle, religious speech); participating in the religious culture of the organization (e.g., attending chapel services or prayer times); expressing their faith to clients; and respecting the dignity and religious freedom of every individual. This information can help prevent unnecessary conflict among staff, and can also help preserve—or reshape—the agency's religious identity.

Summary of recommendations for FBOs

- **Assess the way your organization currently takes religion into account in hiring.** Is a religious orientation a requirement, a preference, or not seen as relevant? Are there certain positions for which a connection to the faith community is a more significant factor? Are these official policies or unwritten traditions?
- **Note how the faith community is, or could be, involved in the process of recruiting or selecting staff** --for example, by publicizing staff openings, or providing input into staffing decisions via board members supplied by the faith community. The participation of the sponsoring faith community in the hiring process is one way that organizations maintain a meaningful connection with this community.
- **Review the role leaders have played in relation to the agency's faith affiliation.** Because of the distinctive role of nonprofit leadership, FBOs tend to hire leaders who reflect their faith in order to help them maintain strong ties with their founding faith community and to sustain their organization's religious identity and culture. Organizations that hire key leaders whose agenda or leadership style is not compatible with the agency's faith community may struggle to maintain a meaningful connection with this community.
- **Ask questions to help discern the role of religion in relation to a specific position.** Does the job entail explicitly religious activities, or interactions with members of the supporting faith community? Does the position involve ethical issues on which the agency takes a faith-based stance, such as dealing with clients' sexuality choices or end-of-life decisions? Does the job entail specialized skills that may be difficult to fill from within the religious community? Does the funding source for a specific position come with restrictions or requirements related to faith? How might the organization benefit from the unique contributions associated with staff from the faith community, or from intentionally diversifying the faith base of the staff?

- **Pay attention to the informal influence of religious factors in staff selection, independent of official hiring preferences.** Members of a faith community may be drawn to work for a FBO by word-of-mouth advertising within their religious network, or by a religiously-motivated commitment to the agency's mission. The overall religious ethos of an organization can also influence staff selection. Agency and governmental policies about hiring co-religionists need to take these informal dynamics into account.
- **The relational networks of staff from the faith community represent an important asset in maintaining connections of support and accountability with this community.** Faith community members offer personal and professional connections within the faith community, which may be particularly important for positions that entail fundraising and other resource development, communications, outreach and volunteer recruitment.
- **Organizations can work with their sponsoring faith community to determine which options for including religion as a factor in hiring best fit their mission and culture.** They should also reassess this framework periodically, as the relationship between nonprofit and faith community as well as the mission of the organization are subject to change.
- **FBOs should communicate their religious history, values and expectations to prospective employees,** so that they can make an informed decision about their "fit." If the organization has any preferences or policies related to faith, make these clear up front, and be able to explain the reason.
- **Consider offering an orientation to the history, values and distinctive beliefs of the sponsoring faith tradition in relation to the nonprofit's goals.** Even if they are not from the sponsoring religion, it can be helpful for staff to know how faith has played a role in the story of the organization's founding and in its ongoing mission.
- Regardless of whether or how religion is a factor in employment decisions, **organizations should be sensitive to the religious convictions of all staff,** including staff with different or no faith affiliations. Nonprofit leaders can seek an appreciative understanding of the diverse ways that faith motivates, guides and sustains the work of their staff.

About the Faith and Organizations Strategies Series

This resource draws on the *Faith and Organizations Project*, which used case studies from 81 organizations to understand the ways that faith based nonprofits and their sponsoring faith communities sustain their relationships. The project looked for strategies that help faith based organizations (FBOs) maintain ties to supporting faith communities, while providing quality services. It compared strategies across religions (Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Evangelicals, Quakers, and African American Christians), and among FBOs