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Extension and Faith-Based Organizations – Understanding Past and Present Linkages and Future Opportunities for Urban Communities

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This examination of the literature explored the limited empirical data available regarding the networks formed between Cooperative Extension (Extension), local partners, and faith-based organizations (FBOs) within metropolitan areas. With FBOs being central to rural towns, as well as urban neighborhoods, Extension must consider engaging with these essential community resources as a means to broaden its reach and serve a wider audience. Not only are these entities underutilized, despite the abundance of human and social capital they provide, but they too are often in need of what Extension has to offer. This article will examine the history of collaborations between urban FBOs and Extension. In addition, the authors will look at how applying the principles of past successes to current problems could potentially enrich urban societies. The authors suggest meaningful ways in which Extension can serve in a capacity that is beneficial but not imposing on moral and/or spiritual beliefs and serve as allies with faith-based organizations to reach and aid new and/or underserved clientele.

Keywords: Extension, faith-based, religion, community engagement, urban, metropolitan

Since its creation through the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, the Cooperative Extension Service (Extension; U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d.) has worked closely with faith leaders to positively impact the social and economic development of rural localities (Prins & Ewert, 2002). As a result, communities have experienced the positive impacts of past collaborations between Extension and faith communities. Strong social capital among faith-based organizations (FBOs) has complimented Extension's work, while Extension has also benefited from the historical integration of these community organizations. In addition, given their high motivation to help solve community challenges, FBOs can serve as a key partner for community impact when paired with Extension's resources to impede local challenges.

However, limited empirical data is available that highlights the successful efforts between Extension and urban faith-based organizations (including churches, mosques, and temples). The role that government (public) agencies play in partnership with FBOs seems overlooked and undervalued. These partnerships can provide a tremendous asset to the communities they serve. Despite what can be a worthy contribution, many nonprofit organizations tend to steer clear of faith-based organizations to minimize the assumption of partiality to one religion or faith. When

Extension professionals yield to such inhibitions due to familiarity or comfort in working with only one group, these actions can severely detract from the ability to serve all communities in need. This article aims to identify how Extension currently works with and through religious organizations in urban communities to reach underserved audiences and the associated positive outcomes. The authors offer insight by

- providing descriptions used to define FBOs;
- offering some historical perspective on the role government has played in building collaborations with these organizations;
- acknowledging the contributions universities have made in forming community coalitions, and
- noting implications and recommendations for forming partnerships.

Methods

The authors reviewed articles that examine the connection between faith-based organizations and Extension, with an intentional focus on urban communities. This search was expanded to include faith-based organizational partnerships with Extension in rural communities and partnerships with non-Extension community groups. However, there was minimal data on the subject even with the expansion and use of additional keywords. Hence, the authors' justification for inculcating this discussion on how Extension can form partnerships to plan and execute programs that speak to the needs of local audiences in metropolitan areas.

All identified resources were examined to demote relevant articles for the review. Pertinent abstracts of interest were considered to determine if the article connected with the objectives. For articles retained through abstract review, the full-length versions were also reviewed, using the same process to identify articles that met the specified criteria. Lastly, the reference sections of articles were explored to determine if additional articles needed to be considered.

Materials were reviewed during the fall and winter of 2021. The authors performed a systematic search of all articles published in journals that target Extension audiences and engagement scholars by utilizing keyword search functions. For example, a search with the keyword "religion" yielded only one example of an Extension partnership with a faith-based organization. A search with the keyword "faith-based" yielded three examples: one urban, one rural, and one not specified. A similar search of keywords "Cooperative" and "Extension" and "faith-based" and "urban" yielded 20 articles, which resulted in no new concrete examples of urban FBO partnerships with Extension. This further raises the argument for the need to investigate this outreach area.

Faith-Based Defined

The Working Group on Human Needs and Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (2003) defined a religious organization as “any entity that is self-identified as motivated by or founded on religious conviction.” Monsma (2002) further divided religious organizations into two groups: faith-integrated organizations, defined as those that integrated religious elements into the social services they supplied, and faith-segmented organizations, those that kept their religious elements largely separate from the social services they provided. Sider and Unruh (2004) developed a comprehensive typology of “Religious Characteristics of Social Service and Educational Organizations and Programs.” The authors refined religious organizations into six specific groups (see Table 1).

Table 1. Religious Characteristics of Social Service and Educational Organizations and Programs (Sider and Unruh, 2004)

Types of Religious Organizations	Description
Faith-Permeated	Faith is integrated at all levels within the organization and the programs delivered
Faith-Centered	Organizations that have structures focused on faith as well as programs that contain a component that has its basis in their faith
Faith-Affiliated	Organizations that were established by people sharing faith and possibly displaying religious symbols; organizations do not necessarily have staff that share the same commitment to the faith
Faith-Background	The organization’s structure and programs appear secular; the organization itself has some sort of background connection to faith
Faith-Secular Partnership	Secular organizations but the faith of those delivering the programs are expected to make positive contributions
Secular	Organizations with no religious or faith aspect

It should be noted that the descriptions above attempt to describe and categorize social service organizations with a faith foundation and may differ from the federal government’s definition of faith-based organizations (The White House, 2021).

Despite these descriptions, the meaning that undergirds the approach of many FBOs is the call to serve. Campbell et al. (2007, p. 1) notes that “From a socioecological perspective, churches and other religious organizations can influence members’ behaviors at multiple levels of change.” That service is duly and intentionally aimed at the communities in which they exist. In times of need, these religious institutions are key in providing access to life’s necessities (i.e., food,

clothing, and shelter). More recently, they have broadened their capacity to develop programs that provide training and development of critical life skills, healthy living, and social justice. All of these, in turn, have become areas emphasized within the mission of Extension.

Federal Emphasis on Faith-Based Initiatives

The role of faith-based institutions has been at the center of many debates over the years. It is indeed a relevant discourse, given that FBOs contribute over \$1 billion annually to the economy (Haakenstad et al., 2015). In fact, the past few presidential administrations have emphasized the need to support these entities. In 2001, the Bush administration established, by executive order, the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood partnerships (The White House: George W. Bush, 2001). It was an effort to form partnerships that would offer much-needed social services to underserved audiences. In turn, faith-based groups would have the opportunity to seek funding through contracts and grants that had not been as readily available to them in previous years. As a result, FBOs would gain easier access to federal grants that would aim to benefit those in most need of assistance (whitehouse.gov).

Such efforts have received bipartisan support, with the Obama administration adopting several principles related to the preceding initiative (Executive Order No. 13,498, 2009). The name was changed to the President's Advisory Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. However, the emphasis on addressing the needs of limited resource communities has remained a primary focus (Marsden, 2012). There was an expectation to determine best practices for delivery methods, as well as an evaluation of the implementation and coordination processes related to these organizations.

In May of 2018, the Trump administration passed an executive order to establish a White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative (Executive Order No. 13,831, 2018). Then in February 2021, the Biden administration instituted an executive order to reestablish the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships to stimulate partnerships between FBOs and community groups to serve those in need (The White House, 2021). This effort was even more comprehensive by noting goals that target economic recovery amid the COVID-19 pandemic, combating systemic racism, and advancing global humanitarianism. In addition, since the early 2000s, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has housed the Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (CFBCI) to provide a means for FBOs to gain further access to federal funds (Marsden, 2012; also see <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1875/200sbp.pdf>). With such consistent emphasis on FBOs forging federal partnerships, states can have similar success. The Land-Grant University system is a premiere vessel to foster such relationships that aim to address local needs at the core of the community.

Land-Grant University Networks

The early 20th century saw numerous Land-Grant University/FBO partnerships, with church leaders and Extension connecting to pursue the perils associated with many community development issues. From providing education on topics of leadership, economics, inter-church cooperation, and women's contribution (Landis & Willard, 1933) to Cornell University's "summer schools for sociology and modern life" (Earp, 1914) to providing networking opportunities among rural churches and Extension professionals (Landis & Willard, 1933), all helped to foster what has become known as one of Extension's premiere strengths—building relationships.

Government agencies in partnership with faith-based organizations is often underrated. However, these partnerships can be a tremendous asset to the communities they serve. Despite what can be a worthy contribution, many public and private nonprofit organizations tend to steer clear of faith-based collaborations (Prins & Ewert, 2002).

Faith-Based Institutions as Partners with Extension

Prins and Ewert (2002), in their study on FBOs and Extension, examined relationships using historical texts that revealed work with church congregations since Extension's founding in 1914. There is a discussion of how the church was central to rural life in the 1800s and 1900s, even as there was a shift in its desire to take up social causes. This was done in partnership with community organizations. However, as the debate over the separation of church and state prevails, many would-be FBO partners have become more cautious in their approach (Prins & Ewert, 2002).

Nonetheless, the authors concluded that by remembering history and the benefits of the social ties that bind, Extension should focus on improving the communities served through the help of these collaborations. There are indeed commonalities that prevail. Both FBOs and Extension have strong social networks, and both offer time-honored, well-established relationships within communities that lend credibility to the work they aim to pursue.

One example of a recent Extension and FBO partnership is found in programming highlighted by Zapata et al. (2021). In this example, Extension educators and specialists working in Tulsa, Oklahoma, partnered with church leaders to implement an early literacy initiative. Here the authors credit the partnership with training community leaders who educated peers and modeled trustworthy behaviors resulting in an FBO taking ownership of the initiative.

An early study by King and Hustedde (1993) revealed how Extension professionals should consider tapping into FBOs to access a variety of free spaces. This setting offers a forum for dialogue to move toward problem-solving. The authors further offered the Black church as an example—an institution that helped give birth to the civil rights movement. Not only did

churches provide a “free space” of solace and reverence, but also a place to strategize and further capitalize on a grassroots approach to developing the skills of local leadership.

Ligrani and Niewolny (2017) identified FBOs’ role in the ever-evolving urban food systems movement. Their study examined the issue of food insecurity and its impact on the state of Virginia. These authors noted three reasons FBOs should be considered essential partners: historical connections between faith and food; the moral and philosophical obligations for FBOs to care for the poor; and the social and cultural capital they possess, which contributes to successful collaborations.

The Decline in Interaction

Prins and Ewert (2002) give probable causes for the decline in partnerships between Extension and FBOs. These include a decline in democratic vision, a rise in political correctness, and apprehension of violating the separation of church and state. However, many would argue that this third concept is not constitutionally based, that public partnerships with FBOs are not precluded, and that partnerships do not violate the “establishment clause” if no preference is given (see U.S. Const. Art. VII, Amend. I).

Laborde (2013, p. 68) gives four model environments regarding religious separations and the state:

- A. Militant Separation: Inadequate protection of religious freedoms; official support and promotion of skepticism or atheism by the state; secularist anti-religious state
- B. Modest Separation: Adequate protection of religious freedoms; no official support of religion(s) by the state; no public funding of religious education and no state aid to religious groups
- C. Modest Establishment: Adequate protection of religious freedoms; official support of religion(s) by the state; public funding of religious education and state aid to religious groups
- D. Full Establishment: Inadequate protection of religious freedoms; official support and promotion of religious orthodoxy by the state; theocratic anti-secular state

Models A and D are not compatible with the U.S. Constitution since they fail to offer adequate religious protections. The debate continues around models B and C. The authors of this article contend that the societal benefits of model C, when offered freely and without religious preference, are the preferred method of public interaction with FBOs. This perspective is consistent with others in the literature (Prins & Ewert, 2002), who conclude that by remembering history and the benefit of the social ties that bind, Extension should focus on improving the communities we serve through the help of these collaborations.

In a more recent article, Campbell (2016) reported the challenges of partnering with FBOs, particularly smaller-scale organizations with limited access to necessary resources. He focused on community social service networks and explored the variables that enhance and impede collaborations among these organizations and other local services. Several longitudinal case studies were used, including FBOs that had received government contracts as part of a California faith-based initiative. Comparative analyses were conducted over 10 years to examine the partnerships formed. Four primary factors identified were organizational niche within the local network, leadership connections and network legitimacy, faith-inspired commitments and persistence, and core organizational competencies and capacities. As a result, the author emphasized a need to support local planning and network development within community contexts. A major argument raised was a need for a shift from operating in silos to partnering with organizations or programs in pursuit of improving lives through collective impact.

Faith-Based Institutions as Pillars in Urban Communities

Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) have been central to the development of local communities around the world. In rural communities, a church is often located in the heart of town; in metropolitan areas, there is a church, mosque, or synagogue on nearly every corner. In addition to providing opportunities for spiritual development, FBOs are critical in meeting the community's needs in various ways. They undoubtedly have a solid comprehension of the local issues and deliver services to meet specific needs through feeding programs, childcare services, health care, as well as workforce preparation initiatives.

The health community has often seen the need to partner with FBOs to promote specific endeavors (Morabia, 2019). Churches are prime locations for serving medically underserved communities. Tagai et al. (2018) used a Faith-Based Organization Capacity Inventory to examine three structural areas of capacity: staffing and space, health promotion experience, and external collaboration using a convenience sample of 34 churches. Through this project, the authors revealed that most churches had health ministries or some focus on health awareness and could serve as an adequate partner in communicating messages about best health management practices. This strategy could similarly serve Extension. As Extension assesses the needs of communities, it may be evident that FBOs can provide assistance and possible solutions to the social ills that challenge urban centers.

Cutts and Gunderson (2019) examined a particular faith-based initiative's impact on underserved patient medical costs. Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center (WFBMC) leadership formed FaithHealth, whose goal is to help patients better understand and maneuver through the often-complex health care system. By committing to outreach and community engagement, FaithHealth, in partnership with other agencies, has expanded its existing work with the underserved. Cutts and Gunderson (2019) noted that from 2015 to 2019, FaithHealth volunteers

provided more than 48,000 contacts with patients, ranging from providing food, transportation, social support, medication assistance, and other services.

The Johns Hopkins Community Health Partnership (J-ChiP) was formed to address the health care issues that plague residents in East Baltimore (Berkowitz et al., 2016). J-ChiP partners with community and faith-based nonprofits have worked consistently to improve the lives of these residents whose lifespan can be 20 years less than residents in other adjoining neighborhoods. The ability to form local partnerships has strengthened the ability to engage community members to take a proactive stance toward health.

The Bronx Health-sponsored Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) program set goals to reduce morbidity and mortality from diabetes and cardiovascular disease in southwest Bronx churches (Kaplan et al., 2009). Other programs have focused on addressing lifestyle changes among African American church members through sessions that highlight addressing weight loss; increasing physical activity; fruit, vegetable, and low-fat dairy intake; and monitoring fat and sodium intake using community-based participatory interventions (Kim et al., 2008; Lancaster et al., 2014). Since religion is core to the values of many Americans, programs like REACH have relied on trusted institutions like FBOs as partners. Because their missions include the moral need to help improve the lives of those around them, this aligns easily with secular or nonprofit organizations with similar values.

When looking abroad, FBOs can also be seen operating as healthcare providers. In parts of Africa, FBOs provide nearly 40 percent of healthcare services (Olivier & Wodon, 2012). These institutions' gained respect is partly due to their organized social capital and longevity within communities. Their solid networks may be quintessential partners that can help build strong collaborations that have a lasting impact.

In a study conducted by McLeigh (2011), 428 international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) were examined to answer the question "Does Faith Matter?" McLeigh compared INGOs based upon having a religious or secular perspective as to whether they were recipients of government funding. In addition, the author was able to utilize variables from previous studies to measure "organizational religiosity" to compare two groups of religious organizations, *Faith-Integrated* and *Faith-Segmented*, with secular groups and found (among other things) that international FBOs were more likely to be "results" oriented and less likely to benefit from governmental funding.

Generating Program Collaborations

Recognizing the Faith-Based Organization's Assets

Faith-based organizations are often at the cusp of the critical issues that affect urban communities. In many resource-poor neighborhoods, they are often the only support for residents

in dire need of assistance (Campbell, 2016; Gunderson et al., 2018). FBOs are also seen as authentic sources, understand the plight of the people, and are willing to meet them where they are in life. Moreover, they quite naturally offer cultural competency when designing and implementing programs. While some may refer to their approach as too fluid, those accessing their services may see this as a relief from the often-bureaucratic procedures that can accompany government-regulated programs.

Today, there is often a debate on whether it is worthwhile to pursue a partnership with FBOs, given that many of them appear to have lesser interest in collaborations. Fu et al. (2021) conducted a recent study to assess whether religiosity and operational capacity influence an FBOs desire to form partnerships. Nearly 200 U.S. FBOs participated by completing a survey. Results revealed that FBOs with high levels of operational capacity were more likely to form partnerships across various sectors (nonprofit, business, public). The findings suggest the intentions of many FBOs may be misunderstood; their lack of capacity may be the contributing factor preventing their eagerness to collaborate. This misunderstanding affords Extension a prime opportunity to offer resources while providing service to a potential partner.

Extension Assets

Just as FBOs bring a distinct set of assets to community partnerships, so does Extension. With over a century of experience in community education and development, Extension interprets and shares unbiased, evidence-based information through the Land-Grant University System. This system represents 112 Land-Grant institutions, of which 19 are historically black universities (HBCUs), and 33 are tribal colleges and universities (U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2019). In addition, there are county Extension offices in or near each of the country's 3,000 counties and parishes. These local offices host at least one and usually multiple county Extension agents/educators.

Implications for Practice

As we examine the faith landscape in the United States, we can see many opportunities for collaborations with Cooperative Extension. Although no official directory exists for all the congregations in the country, the Hartford Institute (2021) estimates that there are between 350,000 and 375,000 religious congregations in the United States. Of this number, 58% are located in urban and suburban communities (Thumma, 2020). In some communities, these FBOs have generations of social capital and trust that would aid Extension in sharing practical, applied research that would positively impact the lives of congregation members.

Consider FBO opportunities for 4-H Youth Development programming. According to the U.S. Department of Education website, over 33,000 private K-12 schools in the United States educate more than 4.5 million students. Of this total, 68.7% are faith-based (3.09 million students). In addition, the number of homeschooled students has increased from 850,000 in 1999 to 1.8

million in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The majority of parents are motivated by a desire for additional religious, moral, and academically-rigorous instruction. These faith-based schools and families could benefit from Extension's expertise in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), public speaking, and leadership development programming, among others.

According to a survey by Faith Communities Today titled *Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview* (Thuuma, 2020), it was found that 33% of participants are seniors (65 or older) whereas, in the general population, just 17% are affiliated with faith or religion. This distribution is similar for congregational leadership. When considered through a national health issues perspective for seniors, it could indicate vast audiences in need of Extension nutrition, health, and financial literacy programming.

The *Faith Communities Today* survey also identified characteristics associated with the rate at which congregations are flourishing; one of these indicators involved community and civic engagement (Thumma, 2020). This observation could translate into FBOs being good partners in educating their members about personal food production and urban food systems.

Recommendations for Future Research

This literature review identifies faith-based organizations as a potentially new, yet largely underserved target audience, particularly in the nation's cities. The authors recommend three areas for future research.

- There are significant gaps in the research base regarding partnerships between Extension and urban faith-based organizations. While anecdotal evidence may exist that Extension is collaborating at some level, more research is necessary to understand better current programming. For example, we know that 4-H Youth Development programming is utilized in faith-based schools. However, the number of schools and students being reached and related impacts are not thoroughly documented.
- We can only speculate on congregational needs and how Extension could engage based on demographic survey data (Thumma, 2020). A comprehensive needs assessment that identifies common problems and how Extension could impact those issues is essential.
- Extension must identify any organizational barriers that may be discouraging urban FBO collaborations. Possible areas of research include resource barriers, prejudices, developing cultural competency, and identifying knowledge gaps regarding how to engage with FBOs respectively. By reflecting on the past, assessing the present, and planning for the future, Extension can grow to be a valued community partner with Urban FBOs.

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Appendix

Faith-Based Organization Typology (Sider & Unruh, 2004)

	Characteristics of Organization					
	Faith-Permeated	Faith-Centered	Faith-Affiliated	Faith-Background	Faith-Secular Partnership	Secular
1. Mission statement and other self-descriptive text	Includes explicitly religious references	Includes explicitly religious references	Religious references may be either explicit or implicit	May have implicit references to religion (e.g., reference to values	No explicit reference to religion in the mission statement of the partnership or the secular partner, but religion may be explicit in the mission of faith partners	No religious content
2. Founding	By religious group or for religious purpose	By religious group or for religious purpose	By religious group or for religious purpose	May have historical tie to a religious group, but connection no longer exists	Faith partners founded by a religious group or for religious purpose; No reference to religious identity or founders of the secular partner; Founders of the partnership may or may not be religious	No reference to the religious identity of founders of the secular partner
3. If affiliated with an external entity, is that entity religious? (e.g., a denomination)	Yes	Yes	Often	Sometimes	May have dual religious/secular affiliation	No

Characteristics of Organization						
	Faith-Permeated	Faith-Centered	Faith-Affiliated	Faith-Background	Faith-Secular Partnership	Secular
4. Selection of controlling board	Explicitly religious; may be a) self-perpetuating board with explicit religious criteria or b) board elected by a religious body	Explicitly or implicitly religious; may be a) self-perpetuating board with explicit or implicit religious criteria for all or most members or b) board elected by a religious body	Some, but not all, board members may be required or expected to have a particular faith or ecclesiastical commitment	Board might have been explicitly religious at one time but is now selected with little or no consideration of members' faith commitment	Board selection is typically controlled by a secular partner with little or no consideration of the commitment of board members; input from faith partners	Faith commitment of board members is not a factor