

FOCUS on FAITH-BASED PARTNERSHIPS:
Coalitions and Congregations in Social Service Ministry



SUMMARY REPORT:

The Coalition Ministries and Congregations Study (CMACS)
by Paula F. Pipes, M.A., Helen Rose Ebaugh, Ph.D., and Janet S. Chafetz, Ph.D.

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Barberton Area Community Ministries (BACM)

Barberton, Ohio

Capitol Hill Group Ministry (CHGM)

Washington, D.C.

Denver Urban Ministries (DenUM)

Denver, Colorado

Interfaith Community Services (ICS)

Escondido, California

Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston (IMGH)

Houston, Texas

Nicholas House (NH)

Atlanta, Georgia

People Responding in Social Ministry (PRISM)

Golden Valley, Minnesota

South Louisville Community Ministries (SLCM)

Louisville, Kentucky

The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport (CCGB)

Bridgeport, Connecticut

BACKGROUND



This report summarizes findings from the Coalition Ministries and Congregations Study (CMACS), a national research project funded by the Lilly Endowment. Faith-based coalitions are known by many different names (e.g. community ministries, ecumenical coalitions) and their characteristics are as varied as the communities they serve. The CMACS project uses the following four characteristics to define the faith-based coalitions that are included in this research:

- 1) the organization identifies itself as faith-based;
- 2) religious congregations are affiliated with the organization;
- 3) it delivers at least one service for individuals or the community; and
- 4) it is governed by its own board of directors.

Coalitions have been an important component of community service delivery for decades, yet little is known about these organizations or their relationships with supporting congregations. The CMACS project utilized two research methods to gain a better understanding of the scope and structure of faith-based service coalitions and to explore the factors that influence the level of support they receive from congregations: 1) a questionnaire, mailed to over 2,000 organizations, that resulted in a 41% response rate, considered high for a mailed survey; and 2) field research that included intensive interviews with leaders of nine coalitions located in various regions of the United States, as well as clergy, volunteers and lay leaders at over 50 of their affiliated congregations.

This summary was extracted from a larger dissemination report that was distributed to CMACS coalition respondents. More information regarding the findings and research methods can be found in the full dissemination report, which is available online at the CMACS project website: www.uh.edu/cmacs.



INTRODUCTION

In countless communities across the United States, faith-based coalitions offer a range of programs benefiting the poor, homeless, elderly, youth and immigrants, all with an emphasis on demonstrating God's love to those in need. While coalitions rely heavily on congregational affiliates, congregations are equally dependent on faith-based coalitions as a means to pursue their social mission. In addition to providing congregations with access to meaningful service opportunities, coalition programs help increase congregants' awareness of social problems and connect them to members of faith traditions other than their own.

In total, the 656 faith-based coalitions that responded to the CMACS survey report that they affiliate with over 80,000 congregations. Extrapolating from this modest indicator, at least one-quarter of all American congregations channel a significant part of their social mission efforts through faith-based coalitions. Simply stated, the partnerships between coalitions and congregations are too important to be allowed to founder.

In the following pages, we discuss the structure, expectations and challenges of these partnerships from the perspective of both coalition and congregational leaders. This extract of the larger dissemination report was specifically designed to encourage congregational and coalition leaders to reexamine, celebrate and refine their mission together. In addition to providing research results and partnership examples, this report includes a set of discussion questions created by clergy and coalition directors. These questions are designed to help leaders develop innovative strategies that enhance the value and effectiveness of their partnership.

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COALITION PARTNERSHIPS

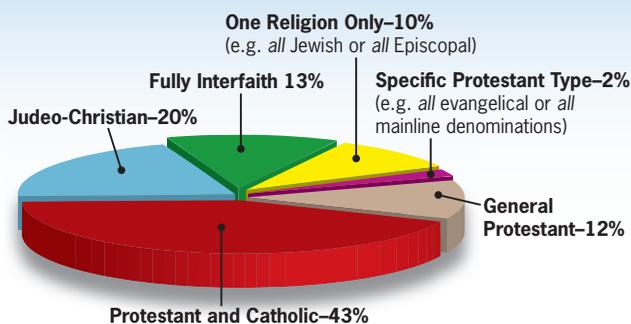
Faith-based coalitions and congregations share a rich history. Founding stories of coalitions often chronicle accounts of congregations joining forces in response to poverty or a local disaster. Some began as clergy networks that were formed to foster supportive, ecumenical relationships or to span racial boundaries. Others were denominational ministries that provided congregations with community service opportunities. In short, coalitions evolved from programs originally sponsored by clergy and lay leaders to fulfill congregational missions. Today, they are autonomous, nonprofit organizations that provide community services. Still, coalitions value congregations as essential partners that provide valuable resources and leadership; and for many coalitions, expanding the social mission of congregations remains central to their purpose:

- 80% of coalition directors report that maintaining ties with local congregations is “most” or “very important” to their overall mission
- 70% of coalitions consider it part of their mission to strengthen congregations’ involvement in the community by providing volunteer opportunities and helping to increase congregations’ awareness of social justice issues.

“We were created by the congregations. We really are their baby. They identified that they had needs within their own structure that they couldn’t satisfy so they created us to be an independent arm of them. We’re so tethered I can’t imagine not being grateful, responsible to them.”
(Coalition Director)

“I see our mission as two-fold: to reach out to the needy, but also to educate the community about poverty and how to relate it to their faith life.”
(Coalition Director)

Figure 1. Characteristics of Coalition Partnerships



Source: Coalition Ministries and Congregations Study 2002-2003, N=656

- The median number of affiliated congregations is 26. The average number of affiliated congregations is 136.
- 25% of coalitions require congregations to sign a covenant of support.
- 21% of coalitions have by-laws that exclude non-Christian congregations.
- 13% of coalitions are Fully Interfaith meaning they include non-Judeo-Christian congregations (e.g. Islamic, Bahá’í, Hindu, Buddhist) in addition to Judeo-Christian congregations.
- 12% of coalitions include Protestant congregations from both evangelical and mainline traditions, but no Catholic congregations.

CONGREGATIONS AND SOCIAL MISSIONS

First and foremost, churches, temples and mosques are religious communities with theological mandates. Their primary mission is to provide sacred space for worship and the ongoing transmission of religious values. Coalitions have become a major conduit through which congregations and their members seek to fulfill their social mission. In our interviews with clergy and lay leaders, we asked about their expectations of partnerships with local coalitions.

- Congregations expect coalitions to provide effective and efficient community services beyond what the congregations could provide on their own.
- Most clergy and lay leaders expect coalitions to provide members with opportunities to fulfill their mitzvah obligation or “put their faith into action,” and to offer meaningful social mission activities that will enhance congregants’ spiritual development.
- Clergy expect that through these partnerships congregants will gain first-hand experience with the human side of poverty and develop a stronger sense of their obligation to serve and promote social justice.
- Participation in a coalition is symbolic of the congregation’s identity as a compassionate and active religious community and helps connect congregants to their common religious identity and values.

Most congregations give coalitions high marks for fulfilling these expectations. However, our research suggests that in many congregations, few congregants experience any direct impact from the partnership because it is rare for more than a handful of members to be actively engaged in the coalition.

Congregational Involvement

Coalition directors were asked to rate congregations’ involvement in seven areas, using a five-point scale ranging from excellent to poor (Figure 2). Survey ratings flag two areas of concern that were also cited as growing problems in our interviews with coalition directors:

- 1) recruiting new volunteers (23.5% below average or poor); and
- 2) engaging the clergy (29.2% below average or poor)

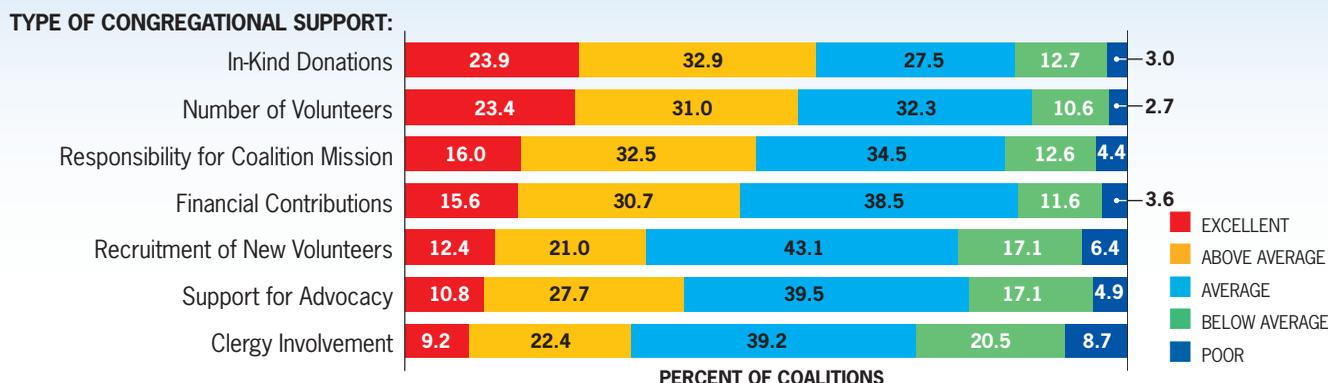
“Social action is not the primary function of a congregation. It is ancillary; it is in keeping with the mission of the congregation, but the congregation is a place of worship and study.” (Synagogue Lay Leader)

Factors that Influence Congregational Involvement

The objective for coalitions is to achieve *congregational-level* commitments that are embodied by *individual* members’ actions. In our interviews, coalition directors’ appreciation of congregations was mingled with their concerns about these ties and keeping congregants actively involved. Many coalition directors are concerned that congregational support is waning, “almost *perfunctory*,” in the words of one community leader. Coalition directors report that their partnering congregations are equally divided between those with strong ties to the coalition and those with only a moderate or weak commitment. Patterns identified in the field research point to four factors that shape congregations’ level of commitment and the manner in which they support coalition programs: *mission orientation, relationships, vitality* and *trust*.

FIGURE 2. Coalition Ratings for Overall Congregational Support

Survey Question: Thinking about the past year, how would you rate congregations' support of your organization in the following specific areas?



Source: Coalition Ministries and Congregations Study 2002-2003, N=656

MISSION ORIENTATION

A passion for community involvement paves the way for developing a strong relationship with the coalition. Congregations differ, however, in the outreach strategies they support and the intensity of their commitment. Clergy can significantly shape a congregation's mission orientation. In our research, we often heard stories of lay leaders who became more involved in a coalition after gaining a deeper understanding of their faith tradition's teachings regarding social mission. In addition, some faith traditions are more likely than others to participate in ecumenical or interfaith collaborations because of their mission priorities. Mainline Protestant congregations represent a significant portion of coalition participants. African American congregations and conservative traditions that emphasize evangelism are less likely to collaborate, and most that participated in this study have weak ties to their local coalition.

RELATIONSHIPS

Diffuse networks, that include lay leaders as well as clergy, are the best strategy for insuring a long-term, active partnership. Coalition leaders stress the importance of clergy endorsements to obtaining congregational support; however, extensive ties with lay leaders are necessary to maintain a strong partnership beyond the present generation and can help insure that newly appointed clergy understand and support a congregation's commitment to the coalition.

"Pastors come and go in terms of their interest, time and physical presence—if [the pastor] is the connection, it all dies." (Pastor)

VITALITY

In our interviews, clergy identified factors they consider important indicators of a thriving congregation, all of which influence the manner and intensity of a congregation's commitment to a coalition: 1) quantitative measures, such as membership numbers, congregational demographics and material resources; 2) an absence of conflict and a strong sense of community and common purpose; 3) spiritual transformation of congregants; and 4) a commitment to social mission.

TRUST

Integrity and fiscal responsibility are obvious factors that impact trust, and therefore, congregations' commitment to a coalition. Additional dimensions of trust that can increase congregational involvement are:

- A coalition's strong reputation as an effective community organization, which enhances the symbolic value of a congregation's participation in the coalition.
- Visible and well communicated coalition programs that insure congregations know how their resources are being used.
- A clear understanding among coalition and congregational leaders regarding policies and mission strategies that insures both partners have similar expectations.

STRENGTHENING COALITION PARTNERSHIPS

Our research findings suggest that it is important for coalition and congregational leaders to explore ways to revitalize their partnerships. On average, coalitions are now over thirty years old and, in most cases, their organizational structure, staff and activities have changed since the partnerships were first formed.

Congregations have changed as well during this time. The natural lifecycle of religious communities includes births, deaths, newcomers, relocations, and leadership changes, transitions that can all impact congregations' resources and priorities. During the past few decades, forces such as baby boomer individualism and dramatic shifts in neighborhood demographics, denominational growth or decline patterns, and family lifestyles have influenced the context in which congregations seek to understand and fulfill their mission. Long-standing partnerships between coalitions and congregations are either now, or soon will be dependent on newcomers with no knowledge of the original commitment and goals upon which the coalition was formed, and coalition programs and strategies may have stagnated despite dramatic changes affecting the community and local congregations.

Addressing community need is the overarching mission that motivates these partnerships and coalition leaders must first insure that program clients receive effective services. It is perhaps equally important to coalitions, and to the social and spiritual missions of congregations, that congregations remain active partners. How can these partnerships be structured so that they provide effective community services and congregations and their members continue to have an active, hands-on role in social missions? In this final section, we examine ways in which congregations are affiliated with coalitions. We also present a framework that coalition and congregational leaders can use to develop strategies that enhance the value of, and congregations' commitment to, coalition partnerships.

Partnership Dimensions

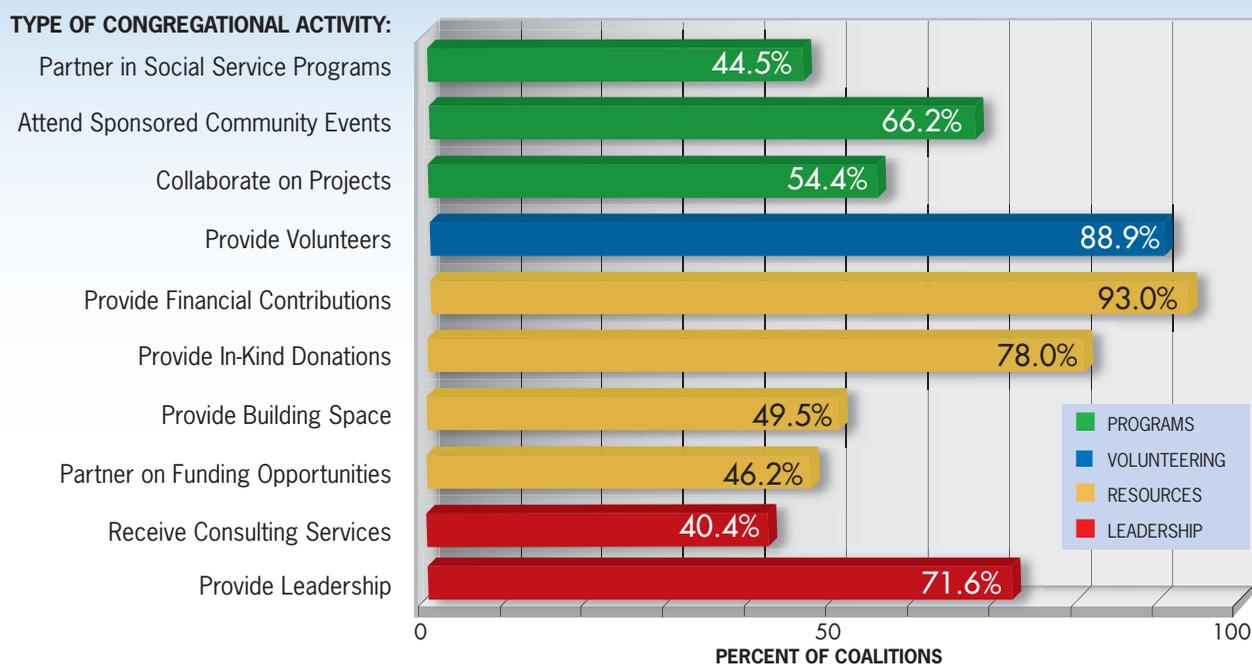
Across the United States, coalitions have developed a considerable array of strategies for partnering with congregations. We asked coalition directors to indicate all of the ways that congregations affiliate with their organizations. The activities they report, which ultimately define the parameters of the partnerships between coalitions and congregations, is each a component of one of the following four partnership dimensions: *programs*, *volunteering*, *resources* and *leadership*. Figure 3 presents the activities that comprise these dimensions and the percentage of coalitions that have one or more congregations that participate in each. For example, approximately 90% of coalitions have congregations that provide volunteers.

Partnership Strategies

The Partnership Strategies table (Table 1) on page 10 provides a framework that coalition and congregational leaders can use to assess their partnerships. This tool focuses attention on how activities associated with the various partnership dimensions intersect with the four factors (previously discussed) that influence congregational commitment: mission orientation, relationships, vitality and trust. Evaluating strategies based on how they affect or interact with these four factors insures that partnership activities will effectively address congregations' individual characteristics and goals. The following partnership stories provide a few examples of ways in which each partnership dimension can affect the manner and intensity of congregational involvement. These examples illustrate how the Partnership Strategies table can be used to develop new ideas that will enhance commitment and add value to coalition partnerships.

FIGURE 3. Partnership Dimensions

Survey Question: In what ways do congregations support or affiliate with your organization?



Source: Coalition Ministries and Congregations Study 2002-2003, N=656

PROGRAMS

Programs are the primary vehicle used to achieve the partners' community service goals and the activities involved should reflect and advance their objectives. In addition to social service programs, coalitions sponsor advocacy campaigns, bridge building events and forums for increasing congregants' awareness of social issues. Programs that consolidate congregational resources to provide centralized services are inherent in the coalition model. However, CMACS survey responses indicate that nearly half of the coalitions assist congregationally-based programs with resources and consulting services (Figure 3). Moreover, many congregational leaders believe it is important to sponsor at least some congregationally-based projects, in addition to partnering with a coalition. The following example demonstrates how one congregation provides emergency assistance to those in need in a manner that is consistent with its *mission* and still partners with a coalition to ensure clients receive comprehensive social services.

Interfaith Community Services (ICS): ICS provides a continuum of care that helps to prevent and resolve homelessness. The coalition has modified its procedures for a partnering congregation that believes it is important for the church to assist individuals in crisis. As a deacon explained, "To have a church and not have it as a refuge or a place where somebody thinks they will be helped just would not be right." But congregational leaders also recognize that ICS offers a range of programs that can help clients achieve independence. At the congregation's request, ICS trained church volunteers to interview individuals requesting emergency assistance. The volunteers provide immediate help with food and financial aid and then refer clients to ICS for additional services. The church authorizes a dollar amount that it will reimburse the coalition for services it provides each client and the coalition provides the church with updates on clients' progress. This arrangement aligns with the congregation's *mission orientation* and clients still benefit from the coalition's continuum of care; the coalition receives additional funds for client services, as well as the church's annual contribution.

VOLUNTEERING

An important coalition strategy for increasing volunteer participation is to offer a variety of opportunities that accommodate a wide range of ages and lifestyles. Leaders should also consider congregations' social and spiritual mission priorities. Clergy are often eager to provide members with service projects they can do together as a community-building activity for the congregation and volunteer activities that promote spiritual growth, push individuals beyond their comfort zone and challenge assumptions about those they serve. It is important that congregational leaders work with the coalition to develop and promote these volunteer activities.

Capitol Hill Group Ministry (CHGM): CHGM partners with Washington, D.C.'s local chapter of Interfaith Hospitality Network to provide case management for homeless families. In addition, the coalition coordinates rotational shelter sites among its member congregations. Congregants can volunteer for something as involved as spending the night or as quick and easy as dropping off an evening meal. Hosting shelter families nurtures congregational *vitality* by engaging members in a common purpose:

It gives us a common thing—on Sunday mornings we know there's something we're all participating in and you can say 'how'd it go for you?'—you have one more thing in common. You have the logbook and you know who was there the night before you and you can't wait to compare how it went. It just gives you this feeling that we're all in this together. (Lay Leader)

Through this collaboration, clients receive counseling and training that can help them achieve self-sufficiency. At the same time, the rotational shelter program exposes volunteers to the realities of poverty, which can impact their *mission orientation* and commitment to social justice:

I was surprised to learn how complicated people's lives are. It's one thing after another—transportation problems, kids and school issues. They spend a half of their day just traveling across the city to get to this service and then another. And watching a family try to negotiate through a Section 8 process...I'm amazed anyone ever gets out of the situation. (Lay Leader)

RESOURCES

Financial contributions from congregations are important, unrestricted funds that coalitions need to cover administrative costs and to maintain services for clients, especially those who are ineligible for grant monies. Most coalition leaders prefer that their organization be a line item in congregations' operating budgets. However, campaigns such as food drives and special offerings are also appreciated and help to keep coalition needs before the congregation. Furthermore, these drives can become symbolic, corporate events for congregations that nurture *vitality* by affirming their common purpose. One pastor noted that her congregation has a strong mission orientation but members' volunteer activities often relate to individual passions. Once a month, this congregation holds a food drive for the coalition that helps reinforce the religious community's common identity.

Resources can flow both ways. In addition to receiving in-kind donations and financial support from congregations, coalitions can bolster congregationally-based programs by issuing small grants or serving as a fiscal agent.

The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport (CCGB): CCGB serves as the fiscal agent through which FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) grant money is passed to approximately 30 emergency feeding programs dispersed throughout the city. Through this program, CCGB helps congregations maintain a network of neighborhood food pantries, as well as several long-standing Community Supper programs for the poor, homeless and elderly. CCGB hosts monthly meetings for the congregational leaders responsible for these food programs where they share efficiency tips and learn about community resources. CCGB also supports these efforts through hunger awareness programs and food drives, as well as allocating donor contributions across participating food programs. The Hunger Outreach program helps congregational volunteers maintain a direct, hands-on role in their neighborhoods and develop stronger *relationships* in the community and with CCGB staff.

LEADERSHIP

Congregational leaders provide coalitions with needed expertise by serving on boards and committees; these *relationships* play an important role in keeping coalitions grounded in their religious identity and congregants informed about coalition strategies and needs. Clergy possess a highly visible, moral authority and, as one lay leader confirmed, can significantly shape a congregation's *mission orientation*:

I think that [mission and outreach] is exemplified by [our pastors]—their values, proactive involvement, how they spend their time and compassion. Everything they do, living it day in and day out and living it by example.

The pastor of this congregation also noted that learning what scripture teaches about social justice has impacted the congregation's mission orientation:

Our gut feeling is the more we have drawn people into Bible study and a little more in-depth examination of [the gospel], the more committed they seem to be to [outreach].

Coalition staff members have the professional background to train volunteers, galvanize congregations' involvement in local issues and educate the community about social problems. Executive directors are the public face of the organization. By attending congregational events, giving presentations and maintaining a presence in the wider community, directors build enthusiasm for the coalition's mission.

Interfaith Community Services (ICS): The ICS leadership hosts monthly meetings at which congregational representatives learn about social problems and policy issues, meet other coalition affiliates, hear client testimonies and take guided tours. In addition to encouraging congregants' commitment to social *mission*, these events help build *relationships* among congregational and coalition leaders and foster *trust* in the coalition:

[The director] showed me all around the office space. If you go there, you're welcomed with open arms and they show you what they have to offer. They put themselves out to tell you what their organization does. It's nice to know because a lot of these organizations that we give money to we don't know for sure what they do with it. (Lay Leader)

TABLE 1. Partnership Strategies

		PARTNERSHIP DIMENSIONS			
		PROGRAMS	VOLUNTEERING	RESOURCES	LEADERSHIP
FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CONGREGATIONAL INVOLVEMENT	MISSION ORIENTATION	Programs align with and foster congregation's sense of social mission	Offer options that align with congregation's mission orientation	Congregation: Identify and align contributions with the congregation's mission; Coalition: Learn about and support congregational programs	Congregation: Maintain vibrant link between social mission and faith tradition's teachings; Coalition: Inform congregations about social issues; Respect congregations' mission priorities
	RELATIONSHIPS	Conduct bridge building events such as community forums, fund raising events, congregational tours, ecumenical and interfaith worship services	Sponsor congregational group projects, community projects	Maintain relationships between lay leaders responsible for social mission and coalition leaders; Rotate congregational liaisons to broaden relationships	Promote relationships and cooperation between congregations; Build clergy networks; Visible presence in congregations; Cultivate new leaders; Maintain congregational representation on coalition board
	VITALITY	Programs utilize and nurture congregational vitality	Provide a range of volunteer opportunities that matches congregational capacity, nurtures congregational community life and encourages spiritual transformation	Identify giving opportunities that utilize and nurture congregational capacity and vitality	Coalitions and congregations: Promote and organize congregant participation in coalition programs
	TRUST	Visible, effective programs are well-respected within the community; Communicate client outcomes (not just numbers); Host assemblies for congregational representatives	Encourage volunteer feedback; Provide training and acknowledge volunteers' contributions	Coalition: Demonstrate and insure fiscal responsibility; Congregation: Maintain current information on coalition finances and programs	Visible presence in the community; Provide program tours; Communicate and demonstrate ability to implement a clear vision

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no panacea that can insure stronger, more effective partnerships as every coalition and congregation is unique. The preceding examples are intended to encourage leaders to assess their existing mission strategies and develop programs and policies that fit their *particular* needs. But first, leaders on both sides of the partnership must be clear about their own goals. The steps outlined below present coalition and congregational leaders with suggestions for initiating dialogues both within and between their respective organizations.

1) Coalitions must define the type of relationship they seek with congregations.

As part of this process, coalition leaders should consider congregations individually. Although coalition programs rely on the collective resources and talents of congregations, the relationship with each is unique because each congregation has a distinct passion and capacity for social action. Some questions coalition leaders might consider are:

- Why are relationships with congregations important to the coalition?
- How do we define our responsibilities to congregations regarding their social mission and active community involvement?
- In what ways are we accountable to congregations?
- What are our goals in terms of building bridges between faith communities?
- How do we define our relationship with congregations? Are congregations: Members? Clients? Partners? Sponsors?

2) Congregations should nurture and shape the coalition partnership to fulfill their mission priorities.

Clergy and lay leaders might review reasons that their congregation partners with the coalition and probe the congregation's mission priorities, gifts and challenges. Some questions congregational leaders might consider are:

- What is our congregation's history of involvement with the coalition?
- What scriptures, traditions or rituals exemplify our faith tradition's teachings regarding social mission?
- What are our expectations of the coalition?
- What are our mission priorities? How does our partnership with the coalition help us fulfill this mission? In what ways could the partnership better serve our goals for social mission?
- In what ways does the coalition partnership help us teach our youth about community needs and social mission?
- What is our responsibility to the coalition? What is our responsibility to the coalition's other partnering congregations?
- Are there specific coalition activities that can help the congregation achieve its primary mission of remaining a vital faith community?
- How can the congregation promote and organize volunteering? In what types of volunteer roles are congregants interested or able to participate?

3) Coalition and congregational leaders must dialogue to understand their overlapping missions and insure that their joint strategies enhance the value and effectiveness of the partnership.

The Partnership Strategies table on page 10 can help focus this effort, guiding leaders to assess activities based on how they align with or impact the four factors that influence congregational involvement: mission orientation; relationships; vitality; and trust. The following questions are intended to facilitate these discussions and to encourage leaders to share information regarding their respective organizations' goals, challenges and expectations of the partnership.

- What partnership activities are particularly meaningful for congregants? For youth? For adults and seniors?
- What obstacles prevent congregants from volunteering to help the coalition? What encourages their volunteer participation?
- Discuss the ways in which congregational participation is important to the coalition.
- In what ways does the partnership help fulfill the coalition's primary mission?
- Are there specific coalition activities that can help the congregation remain a vital faith community?
- What are some of the coalition's biggest challenges? The congregation's? What strategies have each considered for addressing these challenges?
- What unmet community or client needs most concern the coalition? The congregation?
- What role should advocacy play in fulfilling the mission of the partnership?
- What role should bridge building play in fulfilling the mission of the partnership?
- Are there new ways to think about untapped or potential resources?

CONCLUSION

There is much cause to celebrate the tremendous accomplishments that coalitions and congregations have achieved together. In addition to providing important community services, coalition partnerships offer volunteer opportunities that can inspire congregations' social mission and contribute to congregational vitality.

Most coalitions survived difficult organizational growing pains before becoming stable, well-resourced community service providers. These challenges were often resolved through the faithful leadership of congregational representatives. Coalition partnerships now face mid-life challenges and in many communities, leaders fear that the initial enthusiasm surrounding the partnership may wane.

Ultimately, coalition and congregational leaders must work together to understand their overlapping missions. As one pastor eloquently stressed, coalition and congregational leaders need to revisit and perhaps re-vision the mission that unites them:

What are common foundations in scripture that connect us? How can we appeal to one another, lift one another up? How does it help us to see ourselves as being involved in common goals? We need to really dig at it through anecdotes, experience the story of one another. Where goals overlap is the why of doing it.

It is our hope that the information and discussion questions included in this report will stimulate and guide such conversations and lead to innovative new strategies that maximize the strength and effectiveness of these partnerships.



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