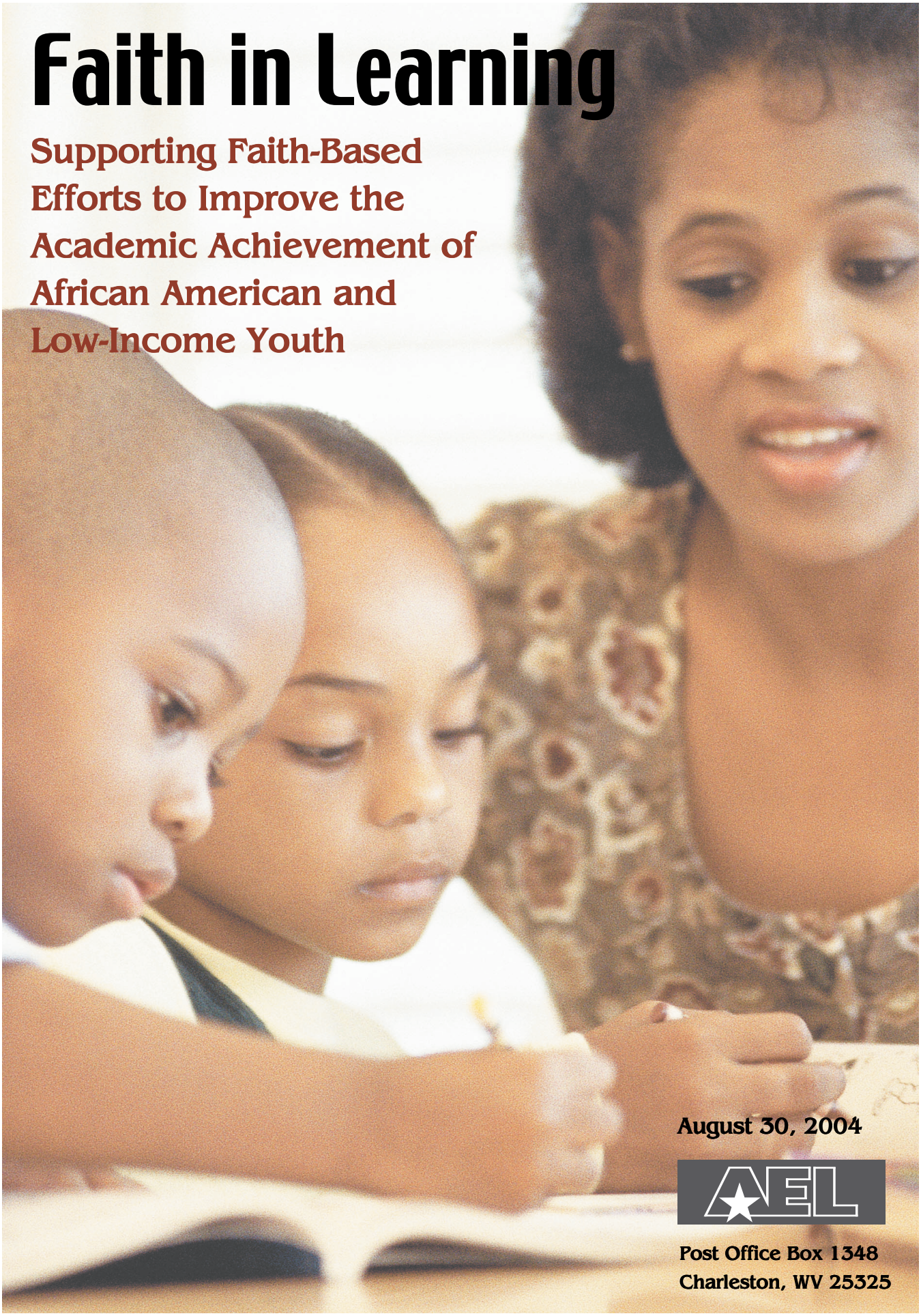
Faith in Learning

Supporting Faith-Based Efforts to Improve the Academic Achievement of African American and Low-Income Youth



August 30, 2004

AEL

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Abstract

Faith in Learning: Lessons learned while supporting faith-based organizations' efforts to improve the academic achievement of African American and at-risk youth

In 2000, AEL began a collaboration with a partnership of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in Charleston, West Virginia. The partnership wished to expand educational support for African American and low-income youth. AEL aimed to bring its knowledge of education to organizations having long-term relationships with young people and commitment to their futures. This paper offers lessons from AEL's experience about developing relationships with FBOs, understanding their culture, assessing the potential for collaboration, and providing technical assistance. It is intended to assist other organizations wishing to form similar collaborations.

Faith in Learning: Supporting Faith-Based Organizations' Efforts to Improve the Academic Achievement of African American and At-Risk Youth

Marian Keyes,AEL

Introduction

The federal government paved the way for educators to partner with faith communities and faith-based organizations when, at the president's request, former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley developed *Religious Expression in Public Schools: A Statement of Principles* in 1995. Riley observed, "Our public schools should not be the public space for a war on values. When you put schools in the middle, education loses. This is why I am encouraged when people of faith reach out to each other and act on their faith and help raise our children." In 2000, AEL decided to reach out to faith-based organizations in Charleston, West Virginia, as a means to provide children and youth some of the supports they need to succeed in school and to live healthy, productive lives. AEL, an educational laboratory whose staff normally works with educators to improve school performance, wished to bring its knowledge of education to faith-based organizations (FBOs) having relationships with young people and the commitment to their futures needed to sustain long-term efforts. This paper is an account of the lessons learned from working with faith-based organizations. It is offered to other organizations considering similar efforts. These organizations are referred to in this paper as intermediary organizations.

The Context

While West Virginia is commonly thought of as a rural Appalachian state, it also has cities with neighborhoods facing the challenges mostly associated with poor communities—unemployment and high poverty; substance abuse and crime; teen pregnancy; stressed and neglected youth. Many of those neighborhoods have significant populations of African

American residents. Because the African American student population in West Virginia is small—approximately 4.1% of the total—and is concentrated in 12 of 55 counties, the role of race and culture in education is often overlooked or subsumed into issues of poverty. (Approximately half of school-aged children in West Virginia receive free or reduced-price school lunches [Kusimo, Petty-Wilson, & Body, 2004].)

Statistics about the well-being of African Americans in West Virginia are grim. The unemployment rate from 1995 to 1997 was approximately 15%, double West Virginia's 7.4% average rate. The unemployment rate for African American teens in West Virginia in 1995 through 1997 was at least 50%, compared with an overall average teen rate of 25% for that period. (E. Merrifield, personal communication, April 2, 1999). African American girls ages 15-19 in West Virginia give birth at a rate of 76.5 births for every 1,000 females compared to 51.9 births for every 1,000 Caucasian females (Kusimo, Petty-Wilson, & Body, 2004). A May 2003 report titled, *Juvenile Corrections Forecast*, states " . . . the percent of Black males committed to corrections was six times greater than the percent of Black males in the general West Virginia juvenile population" (Jutzel, Lester, & Naro, 2003). A 2001 U.S. Census Bureau report shows that one-third of the people behind bars in West Virginia are African American, despite the fact that African Americans represent only 3% of the state's population. According to Boot (2001), "One out of every 16 Black people in the Mountain state is behind bars. One out of every 10 Black men is incarcerated. Comparatively, one out of every 255 white people is behind bars." As the academic achievement of African American youth continues to lag, their unemployment and teen pregnancy rates continue to be disproportionate, their incarceration rates continue to rise, and the impact on the lives of children, families, and communities is devastating.

Kanawha County, West Virginia, where AEL's corporate offices are located, has the largest number of African American youth in the state and the largest percentage of at-risk African American youth (Kusimo, Petty-Wilson, & Body, 2004). State achievement test data for the Kanawha County school system reveal that pronounced academic achievement disparities between African American youth and their non-African American peers exist in every subject and at every grade level.

AEL recognized that schools alone cannot address all of the issues associated with educating at-risk African American youth. Community involvement in the process of educating these youth is needed to reverse current trends. Although more research is needed, correlational studies and experimental research affirm that the attention of parents or guardians and community members to students' educational progress and the quality of students' school experience is positively related to student outcomes. (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Faith-based institutions hold particular promise for helping young people to grow into adult responsibilities under the watchful eyes of caring adults (Comer, 1993).

AEL wanted to learn how its skills and knowledge as an intermediary organization like itself could best be used to support community efforts, particularly those of faith-based organizations. Work with FBOs supplements two AEL projects in Kanawha County, West Virginia. One, called the MAACK (Maximizing the Achievement of African American Children in Kanawha) Pilot School Project, addresses the achievement gap between African American students, many of whom are low income, and their peers by facilitating school teams' efforts to analyze data and to make improvements in instruction and schooling practices that address needs identified by the data. The other, the MAACK Community Initiative, organized dialogues between local district educators and African American community leaders. AEL continues to be a resource to the community group that evolved from those dialogues.

The Journey

In May 2000, representatives from 17 local African American churches attended an AEL-sponsored conference. The conference was planned by AEL staff and seven African American pastors. Each pastor suggested other FBOs that might have an interest in attending. The pastors or their designees who attended represented churches either based in low-income neighborhoods or whose congregations included people from low-income neighborhoods. During the conference, church leaders identified problems affecting youth that they wanted their churches to be able to address. At the end of the conference, those interested in pursuing the possibilities for collaborative programs were invited to begin planning together.

The conference began a nearly two-year effort to establish working collaborations among FBOs around education-related issues that the pastors had identified as urgent. Seven pastors formed the Partnership of African American Churches (PAAC) in 2000 and incorporated it in 2001. The PAAC continues as a partnership, although AEL no longer has a formal relationship with it. AEL does, however, maintain relationships with individual church members and pastors who offer educational programs for youth or who advocate for improvements in public education. Some of these relationships are with PAAC member churches.

As AEL began working with African American church leaders, its task was two-fold:

- to bring information about the education crisis to them
- to provide guidance and support as they determined whether and/or how they would respond.

After two years of collaboration with the PAAC, AEL concluded that, because of the time required for the partnership to develop consensus on priorities and form collaborative working relationships, assisting individual faith-based organizations was a more efficient way for AEL to

use its resources toward its primary goal of improving the academic achievement of African American and at-risk youth.

As AEL worked with faith-based communities, staff identified a number of risks, dilemmas, and rewards inherent in such work. It is out of these experiences that the following lessons are offered.

Lessons Learned from Working with FBOs

Risks and Dilemmas

Forming partnerships among community organizations to achieve common goals is attractive in concept and often thorny in reality. Whenever two or more organizations work together, there will be times when the priorities of one conflict with those of another, when assumptions about points of agreement turn out to be mistaken, and when organizational cultures clash. Opportunities for misunderstandings and cultural clashes can be especially sensitive in collaborations between FBOs and intermediary organizations, as well as between people with African American and Euro-American perspectives. For example, if the intermediary recommends youth programs that research has shown to be best practice, but the FBO prefers to develop its own program without regard to such information, will the intermediary be willing to assist with program development? If the intermediary's scope of work is focused on youth, but the FBO partnership chooses to place priority on adult offenders or senior citizens, will the intermediary need to end the relationship?

Both AEL and the FBOs were concerned about church-state issues. Just as the pastors did not want AEL's assistance to constrain faith-centered actions of faith, AEL did not want to appear to be acting in support of religious tenets.

Some of the FBOs were wary of AEL's identity as a predominantly Euro-American research organization. Their pastors did not want to volunteer themselves or their parishioners as research subjects when neither the research agenda nor its results would be in their control. Some had been previously involved with research organizations that had approached them in a spirit of collaboration, but left them feeling exploited.

An additional concern was the relationships among pastors. Successful collaboration would require pastors to develop trust in one another as well as in AEL. If this new collaboration were to succeed, it would be necessary for partners to have equal voices and true consensus in decisions. African American pastors are typically both church and community leaders, not followers. They would need time to find common ground, identify problems about which they all felt a similar urgency, and negotiate common solutions. As AEL and the FBOs began to work together to support and improve education for low-income and African American youth, each had much to learn from the other.

Developing Productive Relationships between Intermediary Organizations and FBOs

Underlying and often complicating the process of developing relationships between the FBO partnership and AEL was the fact that the FBOs were African American and most of AEL's staff were not. That fact produced opportunities for miscommunication and misunderstanding, leading to several lessons.

The need for a cultural bridge. When intermediary organizations offer services to FBOs who have already c*hosen* to work together and look to the intermediary for help with pre-determined and narrowly defined tasks, there is less room for misunderstanding. However, when an intermediary helps a new partnership organize and define its purpose and goals, someone who understands the work and culture of both the intermediary organization and the faith community, and who has credibility in both venues is critical to facilitating relationships. AEL was

instrumental in forming the Partnership of African American Churches (PAAC) and facilitated the process of establishing its goals. This prominent role led to some tension over who was in control. Fortunately, an AEL staff member was also a well-known and respected member of the African American community. She had proposed the faith-based collaboration to AEL, and her ability to translate the perspectives of the FBOs to AEL and visa versa was invaluable.

The presence of a cultural bridge, however, does not substitute for people making the effort to cross it. It is a mistake to rely on the person who can translate each group to the other to become each group's sole interpreter. Trust does not automatically transfer from individuals to the organizations they represent. Time and experience with one another are needed to broaden trust beyond the person serving as the bridge.

Avoiding the role of spokesperson. Once the PAAC began generating publicity, people from mainstream organizations such as university extension services and public school personnel began to contact AEL, asking it to enlist the cooperation of the PAAC or to speak for it. These organizations were often required by their grantors to show evidence that they had consulted minority communities as they planned actions. Yet some had neither contacts nor experience in those communities. They looked to AEL, an organization more familiar to them, to act as liaison to African American community members and leaders, and to recruit people for their organization's needs. As AEL staff informed the partnership of requests, its members were quick to point out that requests should be made to the PAAC directly. Rather than conveying requests to the PAAC, AEL began to provide contact information for the PAAC to anyone who sought AEL's help in soliciting the PAAC's involvement. The PAAC was then able to define itself as an independent group with its own priorities, willing to enter into dialogue, but not willing to comply automatically with whatever requests were made.

Understanding the Culture of FBOs

The staff of any organization comes to accept as the norm decision-making timelines and processes used by that organization. The processes and timelines of FBOs, however, may differ from that of the intermediary and, indeed, from one another.

Holding modest expectations. Representatives from 17 local African American churches attended the inaugural conference; however, only the seven pastors who planned the conference expressed an interest in continuing the collaboration with one another and with AEL. Some of the others had well-established programs and were reluctant to take action that might necessitate modifying their own programs. A few had formed nonprofit corporations for social action and felt that participating in a new partnership could lead to a conflict of interest with their corporations. Others were simply not ready to move beyond the arenas of their local congregations. The seven pastors who remained at the table headed churches within the Protestant tradition, but from different denominations. Before AEL invited them to help plan the conference, some were acquainted, but others only knew of one another. It became clear that before the partners could agree on goals and action plans, they would need time to develop mutual understanding. AEL would need to commit to the collaboration for the long haul and not expect quick results.

Pastors' responsibilities. When developing relationships with FBOs, the intermediary needs to be sensitive to the diversity of FBOs and of their pastors. Some pastors are seminary graduates who have received extensive training for their positions. Others have felt called by God to found churches and may have no special training. Some pastors are free to speak for their congregations; others must first consult oversight committees. Some churches are autonomous; others are affiliated with and guided by national organizations. Therefore, one pastor may make a decision that another will require time to consider.

Working with pastors also requires patience, since pastoral duties, which are extensive and often unpredictable, may take precedence at times over other commitments. Intermediaries will need to understand the pastor's working conditions, rather than assuming that absence at partnership affairs indicates a lack of commitment.

Pastors' roles. Pastors are both practical managers and religious leaders. Their congregations consult them for guidance during personal crises. In African American churches, the pastor's leadership role can extend beyond their congregations into the broader community. Pastors are expected to wear the mantle of authority and certainty when people are upset or fearful. When intermediaries are called on to offer training to pastors on subjects out of their fields of expertise, it is important to design the experience so as to accord the dignity due them. Activities that require pastors to expose a lack of knowledge among their peers may be counterproductive if not handled with sensitivity. Intermediaries should also avoid the appearance of dictating to pastors. A pastor in Philadelphia whose church was part of a project to provide a literacy program, Youth Education for Tomorrow (YET) developed by Public/Private Ventures, said in an interview,

> I think we're being treated as if we're part of the corporation. I'm not part of your corporation, and you're not my boss. I report to a higher authority . . . our process is totally different . . . .You came and asked me to do this program in my—MY—church. This is not your property. That means that I'm going to decide where and when it's going to happen. (Hangley & McClanahan, 2002, p. 23)

Assessing the Potential for Collaboration to Improve Education

When considering taking the initiative to form collaborations among FBOs or between FBOs and schools, intermediaries need to think about the relative weight they will place on the

dual goals of (1) enhancing the capacity of organizations to work together to improve education and (2) increasing the number and effectiveness of youth programs. Both are worthy goals, but they may have different timelines and require different kinds of support. Capacity building requires long-term commitment and can have outcomes that are difficult to measure. If the goal of capacity building is for people to define their own priorities and act on their own behalf, those priorities and actions cannot be predetermined. If the intermediary's goal is to improve education opportunities, spending the time and resources necessary to build new partnerships may not be the most efficient means to that end. It was almost two years before the PAAC began to function as an entity independent of AEL's technical assistance. As it evolved, its priorities shifted so much that its first programmatic emphasis became health care for senior citizens. While some partnership FBO's created or strengthened their youth education programs, or expanded their work with local schools, these were individual church actions rather than partnership actions. Two years later—that is, four years after it had formed—the PAAC wrote a successful three-year West Virginia 21st Century Community Learning Center grant proposal to create an after-school program for middle school youth.

Public school-FBO collaborations. Many school districts partner with local businesses and community organizations for various purposes. These partnerships are frequently designed so as not to need cross-staff collaboration beyond matters of logistics. The school may train volunteer tutors or arrange meeting space and oversee mentors supplied by community organizations. Businesses may provide curriculum materials, scholarships, people or funds for special purposes. Common planning and collaborative program delivery is more rare. If it is difficult for FBOs to develop common ground, it can be even more difficult for school district personnel to take into account the views of non-educators, particularly when they represent the other side of the church-state divide, and particularly when that divide has been fraught with

controversy. Austin Interfaith Alliance is one example of substantive school-community collaboration. It formed in 1985, but the opportunity to work with teachers and parents in a substantive way didn't arise until a question about the difference between students' grades and their performance on state achievement tests was posed in a PTA meeting in 1991 (Simon, Gold, & Brown, 2002). If the will and the resources exist to develop programs collaboratively, the experience will ultimately build capacity. A Mott Foundation survey of emerging school-community initiatives observes that

> the end goal of school-community initiatives is not only to help individual students and families succeed but also to develop the capacity within communities and neighborhoods to identify their own issues and marshal sufficient resources to solve problems. *Over time,* (emphasis added) we believe that this kind of community capacity can help to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the schools, lead to service delivery methods that respond more fully to child and family needs, and help to improve the safety and economic vitality of neighborhoods. (Melaville & Blank, 1998, p. 101)

The potential for productive school-FBO collaboration may rest on whether there are individuals representing each group who see the potential in the collaboration, who are willing to persist through problems, and who develop working relationships across groups. AEL initiated a series of dialogue sessions between public school administrators and African American community leaders in order to build relationships that might develop into collaborative actions. Some, but not all of the PAAC members, participated in the dialogues. Since then, several collaborations have developed: A church whose pastor participated in the dialogues has partnered with a middle school in an informal mentoring program called "Angels in the

Hallway." The director of an after-school program in another church collaborated with local university and school district representatives to write a grant that would enable more African Americans to complete course work to be credentialed as para-professionals in special education classrooms. A principal invited community representatives to join a team of teachers and administrators that is working to reduce the achievement gap in the school.

Inter-FBO collaborations. If FBOs have formed partnerships to address issues consistent with the intermediary's scope of work, the intermediary's role is relatively simple. When considering whether to be involved with the partnership, the main questions will be whether the partnership has clearly defined its needs and whether the intermediary has the resources and skills to meet them. But if the intermediary wishes to promote collaborative actions on behalf of youth education, two factors will strongly influence the potential for developing viable collaborations:

1. How urgent the need is felt to be and
2. How strongly the FBOs believe collaborating has the potential to meet the need beyond what their individual efforts can achieve

Recognizing that there is a problem is not necessarily sufficient to move FBOs to action. Human problems are the daily bread of religious organizations. Many things will influence which ones they address: the level of impact on their own congregations compared with the impact of other problems; pastors' sense of which issues most concern their congregations; the pastors' belief that they and/or their congregation can both contribute to and benefit from collaboration; and pastors' own sense of what God has called them to do. If FBOs have chosen individually to address educational achievement before the opportunity to collaborate arises, their interest in collaboration may depend on the level of satisfaction or frustration with their own efforts. Those

with strong programs are likely to be cautious about any action that might interfere with their current success.

AEL found that some pastors appeared to operate independently from their organizations, and to be either unable or reluctant to include others in program planning. If one of the goals of the collaboration is to build capacity in the community, such autonomy is counterproductive. Regardless, the demands ministry places on pastors will limit their ability to contribute to the collaboration if the effort begins and ends in their hands.

Technical Assistance

FBOs may have youth education programs, and even have established nonprofit corporations to operate them. The fact that programs and corporations exist does not mean that they are grounded in research or are efficient and thorough in record keeping. Pastors and congregations of churches in low-income neighborhoods are more likely to act in response to people's needs than first to establish bureaucratic processes. Aaron Dorfman, Executive Director of PACT, a coalition of FBOs in Miami, observes,

> Faith-based community organizing focuses intentionally on building relationships between people . . . it is out of these relationships that people have the courage to act to make change, to act to improve their community. (p. 4)

Typically, FBO-led social service programs are stretched thin. Whether their staffs are volunteer or paid, they place priority on service. The record keeping necessary for evaluation and for documenting success for potential funders can be viewed as time spent on paper work, when what is most needed is time spent with people. If such programs wish to grow, they need the infrastructure that will persuade funders to support them. They often need not only help with creating record-keeping procedures that are sufficient without being burdensome, but also help

convincing program leaders and staff to see the importance of using them. The Pew Foundation, in its strategy paper (2001), proposed the formation of the Faith and Service Technical Education Network (FASTEN) in recognition that

> there is little collective knowledge on the best ways to collaborate, the range of program models available and the legal and administrative standards that apply . . . FBO leaders often lack information on best practices in social service delivery, or on the rules pertaining to civil rights protections and administrative practices. (p. 16)

AEL found that FBOs with existing youth programs needed help with

- grant writing
- participant tracking systems
- networking with schools and district personnel
- staff training in program delivery and record keeping

Those who wished to begin programs also needed help with

- program design and evaluation
- identifying and acquiring appropriate program materials
- using research to identify and support program practices

It would be most efficient in terms of resources from an intermediary's perspective, to develop and schedule sessions in these topics. In Detroit, The Skillman Foundation's faith-based initiative began in 2001 with a series of technical assistance sessions leading to collaborative grant proposals and resulting in eight collaborative after-school programs with 47 participating faith-based organizations (The Skillman Foundation, 2004). However, this approach probably works best in large metropolitan areas and when the intermediary can also offer the inducement of potential funding for those who participate in the sessions. AEL found it to be more effective,

though more costly, to offer assistance on an individual basis. There were not enough FBOs with programs at the same stage of development to warrant developing and delivering generic workshops. AEL provided materials and assistance to five youth programs in differing stages of development. It did offer scheduled sessions on reading instruction for youth program staff and volunteer tutors. Because the pool of tutors is always changing, the need for training was continuous in all programs.

Conclusion

People from FBOs are trusted in their communities because they act from faith, and have proven themselves over time to be of good will. They see people as complex wholes—members of families and community, beset with a variety of problems and possessing a variety of strengths and weaknesses, rather than as clients whose strengths are irrelevant and whose problems are of interest only if they meet their organization's guidelines. Lisbeth Schorr, in *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America* (1998), conducted a nationwide study of social service programs using theory-based evaluation, which combines outcome measures with an understanding of the process that produced the outcomes. She identifies seven attributes of highly effective programs. Successful programs, she says

1. are comprehensive, flexible, responsive, and persevering
2. see children in the context of their families
3. deal with families as parts of neighborhoods and communities
4. have a long-term, preventive orientation, a clear mission, and continue to evolve over time
5. operate in settings that encourage practitioners to build strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect

6. are well managed by competent and committed individuals with clearly identifiable skills
7. have staffs that are trained and supported to provide high-quality, responsive services.

Most FBOs are uniquely qualified to satisfy the first five attributes. They begin with relationships and develop programs in response to the needs those relationships reveal. They are members of the communities they serve. Their existence and concern predate and will continue beyond any program they develop.

Intermediaries can offer valuable assistance to achieve the last two attributes. If FBOs and intermediaries each value the contributions of the other and stay the course, they can change lives. Intermediaries should never forget, however, that the motivating force is grounded in faith. The intermediary brings skills to the partnership. The FBO brings heart and will.

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