

Editorial

Postscript of Special Issue “Religion, Welfare and Social Service Provision: Common Ground”

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The roots of social work and other helping professions run deep in community-based connections, and joining with local faith-based entities to explore strengths and challenges is essential to good organization and planning.

Far too often, however, resources in the community go unnoticed, only revealing themselves to social work scholars and professionals when they immerse themselves among those they are trying to help. As the preceding pages demonstrate, local religious institutions have a long tradition of emphasizing and promoting community development and communal assistance. And these entities are usually best placed to serve those most in need—right in the communities where they live, work and pray.

By and large, faith-based entities are more than eager to partner with local scholars and professionals. The Congregational Nurse Program in Greensboro, NC, where I teach, is a telling example of how, in many cases, religion-based organizations welcome help in attending to their congregations' needs.

A decade ago the Greensboro nurse program was well established and doing great work in the community. But until a chance encounter between a nurse in the program and a social work professor at a local university, the Congregational Nurse Program was not on the radar of any of the area's campuses. The program's coordinator had reached out to local universities to explore how students could study social work by working alongside nurses to meet the needs of the community's most vulnerable, but nothing came of the effort.

It took that chance encounter a decade ago for the collaboration to come to fruition. Together with the Congregational Nurse Program, our social work department at the University of North Carolina Greensboro created a field education unit that paired social work students with congregational nurses. Our collaboration, in turn, resulted in a far deeper effort: Two university social work programs, together with a local philanthropic organization with faith-based roots and an established group of nurses in the community, working to provide an array of services to people whose needs were not being met by traditional providers.

Through this action research project, today we have a well-coordinated team of social work students, nurses and community health workers stationed in more than 50 locations around Greensboro. Much of the effort is located in churches and synagogues, as well as in faith-affiliated shelters for those experiencing homelessness.

What we have discovered is that coming to church to see that nice nurse or social worker holds far less stigma than, say, going into a mental health clinic, or even a doctor's office. At our locations we can screen for health problems, assess mental wellness and identify needs—all without anyone else knowing anything, except that someone went to church.

The same can be said for shelters for those experiencing homelessness. By embedding ourselves in the shelters, we have become part of the service array, and can be where those in need are. Our initial collaboration with the Congregational Nurse Program eventually led to funding for an integrated

health clinic in the local day shelter. Today, our students are an integral part of the clinic, which addresses medical and behavioral health needs, and are involved in a wide range of activities.

Of course, not all faith-based organizations are interested in these types of partnerships. But many are.

Relationship building is invaluable in the helping professions, allowing for a melding of missions among often fundamentally different institutions. My university's partnership with the Congregational Nurse Program and a local philanthropic organization, the Cone Health Foundation, exemplifies how relationship building can overcome the financial and organizational hurdles that often stymie efforts to help those in need.

Because we locate ourselves in local churches, synagogues and shelters, there is little to no overhead cost to our program. We do not have to rent an office, pay for utilities, or buy expensive equipment. We rely on the resources generously provided by entities in the community. And they, in turn, have come to rely on our knowledge and our students' engaged labor.

The partnerships we have established in Greensboro are rich with opportunities to address unmet needs, all while educating the next generation of professional social workers through immersion in the community. Such joining of forces, as the articles in this volume illustrate, best leverage the respective skills and resources that different institutions bring to the table. It is our hope that the insights in these pages will inspire others to take a deeper look at religiously affiliated helping and the many possibilities it holds for effective cooperation.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.



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