

BOARD WORKS

Church-Related or Faith-Based?

By Rick Stiffney, President/CEO, MHS Alliance

MHS Alliance members often refer to themselves as church-related or faith-based. The terms are both important but mean different things. To define an organization as *church-related* says something about its linkage with a community of faith. To say an organization is *faith-based* may say something about its essential character. We might reasonably assume that whether an organization is related to the church or is faith-based, this makes some difference in mission, values, services, and culture.

There are many different ways to be church-related. Within the MHS Alliance membership, there are at least six different models of affiliation with the church. All presuppose an understanding that the member organization is serving as an expression of the mission and ministry of the church. Each model has strengths and vulnerabilities. And each contributes to the unique identity of the organization. A description of these six models is available from MHS Alliance.

The term faith-based can be ambiguous. What is the nature of this faith? Upon whose faith was or is the organization based? Do the beliefs and values upon which the organization was founded (based) still have meaning? What does being faith-based look like?

A few years ago, the President of the United States launched “faith-based initiatives” as a new way for the government to serve the people. The purpose was to direct federal funding into not-for-profit activities operated by faith-based providers. This approach required that “faith-based” be more precisely defined. Although the federal government never did define the term and the overall funding initiative sputtered, this idea provided a catalyst for various people to consider the term more carefully.

An inter-faith health and human services consortium recently developed a typology to describe “*faith-based*”. The members identified six different ways in which the beliefs of a founding community of faith might continue to have an impact on corporate culture, values, and programs. The continuum below represents the range of possibilities as described in the typology. The range is from a culture that is faith-permeated to a culture that is secular, essentially devoid of evidence of the faith of the founders.

Faith-permeated

Faith-centered

Faith-affiliated

Faith background

Faith/secular

Secular

DATES TO REMEMBER:

- **March 29 to April 1**
Mennonite Health
Assembly Pittsburgh
- **March 29 Annual Members Lunch and Meeting**
12:00 – 2:30
- **March 29 Sponsored Organization CEOs and Board Chairs with MHS Alliance Board**
3:00 – 5:00
- **April 14 Board Chair and CEO seminar**

The consortium studied many dimensions of organizational life and then described practices in those dimensions that fit one of the six different types of faith orientations. I have selected five dimensions to tease out the kind of distinctions they made.

For Discussion

As a board, you might use the typology on the next page as a way to think together about how faith is expressed within your organization. These questions can help guide your discussion:

- Where would you plot your organization today on the continuum?
- Has your organization’s location on the continuum changed since its founding? If so, how?
- As you look to the future—say 10 years out—do you want to shift in any way to place your organization at a different location on the continuum? Why or why not?

Faith-Based: A Continuum

D I M E N S I O N S		Faith-permeated	Faith-centered	Faith-affiliated	Faith background	Faith/secular	Secular
	Mission statement	Explicitly religious	Explicitly religious	May be either explicit or implicit	Implicit (e.g., general reference to “promoting values”)	No reference to religion in mission of the partnership or the secular partner, but religion may be explicit in mission statements of faith partners	No spiritual content, but implicit or explicit references to values are often present
	Selection of board	Explicitly religious. May be: a) self-perpetuating board with explicit religious criteria; b) board elected by a religious body	Explicitly religious. May be: a) self-perpetuating board with explicit religious criteria; 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 now selected with little or no consideration of members’ faith commitment	Program controlled by secular partners, with little or no consideration of faith commitment of board members; input from faith partners	Faith commitment of board members not a factor
	Selection of senior staff	Faith commitment an explicit prerequisite	Faith commitment an explicit or implicit prerequisite	Normally (perhaps by unwritten expectation) share the organization’s faith commitment	Faith commitment is not relevant	Required to have respect for but not to share faith of religious partners	Consideration of faith commitment considered improper
	Religious environment	Usually	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Sometimes (program administration is usually located in a secular environment, while program activities may be located in a religious environment)	No religious content
	Form of integration of religious content with programs	Integrated/mandatory (engagement with explicitly religious content is required of all participants)	Integrated/optional or invitational (engagement of participants with explicitly religious content is optional, or takes place in activities outside program parameters)	Invitational or relational (virtually all engagement of participants with explicitly religious content takes place in optional activities outside the program, or in informal relationships cultivated with staff)	Implicit (participants only encounter religious content if they seek it out)	Implicit, invitational, or relational, depending on volunteers/staff of the faith partner	None
Adapted from a typology originally developed by Ronald J. Sider and Heidi Rolland Unruh, based in part on the research of the Congregations, Communities and Leadership Development Project, which they direct.							

Our Vision

To be a community of Anabaptist health and human service ministries committed to God’s work of healing and hope in Christ Jesus.

Our Mission

To develop the capacity of health and human service organizations to provide care and service to those in need in a way that expresses the unique vision, values and beliefs of MHS Alliance.

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