CROSSING THE DIVIDE:

Perceptions and Experiences of Nonprofit Organizations in Religious-Secular Funding Partnerships

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in collaboration with The Aspen Institute, Religion & Society Program

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Selected Profiles

Our team interviewed twenty-six mid- to upper-level professionals at grantmaking and grant-receiving nonprofit organizations across the nation to collect data on their perceptions and experiences related to the intersection of faith and philanthropy. We designed our interview script to help answer the following research questions:

What are the perceptions and experiences of...
A. Secular foundations that fund faith-based grantees
B. Faith-based grantees that receive funding from secular foundations
C. Faith-based foundations that fund secular grantees, and
D. Secular grantees that receive funding from faith-based foundations?

We chose to interview leaders from nonprofit organizations whose funding patterns crossed the religious-secular divide. These organizations were identified through publicly available records in Candid's Foundation Directory. We asked questions about the organizations' history, missions, priorities, and experiences funding organizations with differing orientations. After identifying qualifying organizations, we conducted 26 interviews across the following four categories: faith-inspired and secular foundations and faith-inspired and secular grantees.

Among the 26 interviews, seven were with faith-inspired foundations, seven secular foundations, eight faith-inspired grantees, and four secular grantees. In total, our team reached out to 161 nonprofit organizations across the United States–23 declined to participate and 134 did not respond. Each organization has been given a pseudonym to protect the identities of the people and organizations we interviewed.

All twenty-six organizations we interviewed provided valuable insights that informed our thematic analysis. We have selected twelve interviews to serve as organizational profiles and add depth, texture, and nuance to our analysis. The following organizations confirm or challenge key themes, present unique perspectives on crossing the secular-faith divide, possess a distinct geographic, demographic, or historical perspective, or exemplify some combination of these characteristics.

Secular Foundations that Fund Faith-Based Grantees

Rust Belt Community Foundation

The Rust Belt Community Foundation (RBCF) is a long-running community foundation serving a region of the Northeast United States hard-hit by the economic transition away from industry and factory work. RBCF supports a variety of local nonprofit programs through grantmaking. As a community foundation, they have different kinds of funds earmarked for various purposes. RBCF distributes some funds through donor-directed grants, following the wishes of individual donors to support specific organizations. Other funds are discretionary; the organization distributes these grants as it sees fit. As part of its discretionary expenditures, RBCF prioritizes grantee programs that align with their areas of focus, in particular those that support local initiatives toward equity and racial justice.

We spoke with a senior executive to determine how religious grantees fit into RBCF's grantmaking program. They emphasized (1) the role religious nonprofits and churches have played in organizing for racial justice and in movements for equity in the past and (2) the fundamental role churches and religious non-profits continue to play in many communities of color. They also recognized that religious and faith-inspired organizations run many programs that provide essential community services, such as food banks, housing support, and child care. By working with religious nonprofits, especially those that operate within disadvantaged communities, RBCF can support these groups more easily. They noted that RBCF ensures that grantees understand what they can and cannot do with these funds, meaning that they cannot be used for evangelism. However, they did speak to their experience previously working for a religious non-profit and how this allows them to effectively help faith-based organizations apply for grants with their organization.

Coastal Legacy Foundation

The Coastal Legacy Foundation (CLF) is a secular foundation based in the Southeastern U.S. It has a history of supporting faith-based nonprofits from its inception in the mid-20th century. About one-fourth of CLF's current grantees are religious. CLF believes that the influence of religious groups and the services they provide play a vital role in the well-being of American society. The foundation directs funding toward several key issue areas, one of which is strengthening faith communities and interfaith dialogue. These grants support Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Baha'i groups, but they primarily support Christian organizations because of the founder's religious affiliation.

CLF staff members decided to expand their grantmaking efforts toward more diverse religious organizations after consulting with religious scholars and experts who underscored the growing phenomenon of religious polarization. Unlike other foundations we interviewed, CLF staff members do not usually prioritize mission alignment when selecting grantees. Rather, they strive to partner with organizations that play a catalytic role in producing leaders in their communities. They want to work with "unusual suspects" and engage people involved with

diverse religious communities – faith-based student associations, mosques, local evangelical churches, and more. They hope to reach people most vulnerable to polarization and unlikely to show up to interfaith events without the concerted efforts of nonprofit organizations dedicated to facilitating interfaith relationships.

CLF is not concerned about grantees' faith-sharing or conversion efforts because its grants are not for operational support; instead, they are directed toward specific projects. The foundation is careful not to fund organizations that promote anti-science views, like opposition to vaccines or climate change denial. CLF is currently working on a project to engage 25% of the conservative population in the U.S. and invite them into dialogue about climate change. Instead of adopting a top-down approach, foundation staff members identify potentially receptive ambassadors from conservative educational institutions to spread awareness in their communities. They have strong working relationships with evangelical, conservative Catholic, and Muslim communities, and are currently developing connections with Jewish organizations.

We interviewed one high-level CLF team member who explained how his personal religious beliefs have evolved over his lifetime. He currently identifies as a progressive evangelical Christian. He believes that CLF does not direct a disproportionate amount of funding toward evangelicals, but his close connections with the evangelical community helps him understand this community better and make informed decisions about grantmaking. He closed his interview by emphasizing that valuing all faith communities and being willing to listen and understand how they work is important for creating a harmonious and healthy American society.

Equitable City Foundation

The Equitable City Foundation (ECF) is located in a large city in the Midwestern U.S. It was founded by a local family in the 1980s to continue their legacy of philanthropy. Funding decisions are based on the degree to which a potential grantee's programs align with several broad categories, such as access to quality education and health care. These funding categories collectively focus on reducing poverty and improving equity in low-income communities. ECF is more concerned that grantees provide individuals with resources to improve their quality of life rather than a grantee's religious affiliation. ECF will fund faith-based organizations if religious activities are not integrated into their programming. For example, ECF would not fund an organization's youth program if it includes Bible readings.

ECF has recently launched an initiative to allocate more funding toward programs that address equity concerns in low income communities. Reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic, an

"[Faith-based organizations] are just another nonprofit; they just have the extra hurdle of showing that they aren't going to use this money for any sectarian purposes."

- Mountain Creek Community Foundation

ECF representative remarked that "this brave new world has shown us that we need to pay attention to equity on a bigger scale." If a faith-based organization addresses inequities in the community, ECF may fund the organization if it does not integrate religious practices into its programming. The work the potential grantee is doing for the community is more closely linked with its funding potential rather than its explicit religious beliefs.

Faith-Based Grantees that Receive Funding from Secular Foundations

Serene and Secure World

Serene and Secure World (SSW) is a Buddhist nonprofit located in a major city in the Eastern United States that provides meditation and self-defense classes to the community. SSW also offers programs to help youth and college students navigate the social and emotional challenges of school. SSW distinguishes itself as a religious, but not a faith-based, organization.

One SSW representative emphasized that Buddhism is categorized as a non-Abrahamic religion, so it creates some interesting points of divergence from the conceptual framework of a faith-based organization we applied to other organizations. Unlike Abrahamic religions that focus on a belief in God, Buddhism focuses on achieving enlightenment. Therefore, SSW does not identify as a faith-based organization, since faith in a deity is not a focus of Buddhism. In the United States, there are two common practices of Buddhism: Eastern Buddhism and Western Buddhism. Eastern Buddhism is rooted in community and culture, and is more common in countries where Buddhism is a major religion, such as China and Thailand. Western Buddhism, which is more common among upper-middle-class individuals, adopts a secularized approach since it is practiced as a form of meditation and personal development.

SSW leads meditation classes for individuals regardless of their religious affiliation. The primary goal of these classes is improving the mental and physical strength of community members. In this way, SSW's programs lean towards Western Buddhism. SSW has experienced relative ease in its funding relationships with secular foundations because many foundations in the United States are more familiar with Western Buddhism. This distinction as a non-Abrahamic religion makes it easier for SSW to receive funding from secular sources compared to faith-based grantees because its practices are non-deistic and do not involve any forms of conversion efforts.

Holy Lamb Educational Foundation

Holy Lamb Educational Foundation (HLEF) is a nonprofit organization supporting Catholic schools in a western coastal state. HLEF provides need-based scholarships to students as well as direct support to Catholic schools to help create and sustain educational programs, such as pre-K. Local community members founded HLEF several decades ago out of concerns that a number of Catholic schools were struggling to remain open after they transitioned away from nuns and clergy as educators to professional teachers (which increased expenses). HLEF

emphasizes the importance of the Catholic part of their mission and believes that spreading Catholic beliefs and values to students, regardless of students' personal religious beliefs, is important. Organization staff believe in evangelism and the positive impact Catholic values can have on people's lives.

Many of HLEF's donors (both individuals and secular nonprofits) come from Catholic backgrounds, but some donate because they believe broadly in the value of education. A recent major donor was a non-Catholic individual who supported HLEF's mission of improving education in their region; the donor was not focused on the religious aspect of the education.

The HLEF representative we interviewed feels that many secular nonprofits that donate to them are interested in improving the quality of local education. They mentioned that, for secular nonprofits, there is often a "bridge person" involved with the donor that has some personal investment into Catholic education and wishes to support it; whether that is out of a desire to support the spread of Catholic values, improve the quality of local education, or expand the diversity of schooling options is unclear. Donors' motives are likely mixed and dependent on the relationship that the "bridge person'' has to Catholic education. This organization is one of many we interviewed that emphasized the importance of pre-existing relationships between organization staff and other community members in forming and maintaining strong religious-secular partnerships.

Jewish Movement for Environmental Preservation

Jewish Movement for Environmental Protection (JMEP) is a Jewish organization that promotes environmental sustainability and conservation efforts. While JMEP's programs are inspired by the Jewish faith, they also focus on values of sustainability, mindfulness (i.e., practices to increase a person's mental and emotional awareness), and social justice. JMEP does not attempt to spread its faith through its programming. Instead, it is focused on creating connections with "anybody who aligns and resonates with [the] work and the worlds that [it] work[s] in," regardless of their faith identity. JMEP teaches people about sustainability from a secular approach, but the ways they embody values such as sustainability and social justice are inspired by Jewish beliefs and culture. The Jewish community believes that the people, *adam,* and the planet, *adamah*, are one and the same. Sustainable practices to care for the Earth and its people are an expression of this belief. Additionally, JMEP sometimes collaborates with organizations representing other faiths, such as Islam and Christianity.

"We're trying to attract more than just the Jewish community... our goal is to attract anybody who aligns and resonates with our work and the worlds that we work in."

- Jewish Movement for Environmental Preservation

Employees are not obligated to hold a Jewish identity. While 65% to 80% of JMEP staff are Jewish, not all positions require knowledge of Jewish faith and culture. JMEP is

willing to receive funding from all sources except for hate groups and organizations with ethical values that differ from its own. Even though it accepts funding from non-Jewish sources, JMEP receives the majority of its operational funds from Jewish foundations. A small portion of funding comes from secular foundations and government sources, most of which goes towards capital development projects.

JMEP receives funding from different types of Jewish foundations, including Jewish community federations and Jewish family foundations. Jewish community federations were created about 120 years ago when the Jewish community recognised the need for a fundraising backbone to support mutual aid groups that provided resources to the community. Today, there are about 50 Jewish community federations that exist throughout the United States to fund grantees that strengthen the Jewish community. While Judaism is a religion, it is also a culture and identity that exists separate from religion. Jewish community federations fund organizations that support the Jewish community regardless of their place on the religious-cultural continuum. Another common funding for organizations like JMEP is family foundations created by Jewish individuals. While these foundations are not inherently religious, they have roots in Jewish faith and culture. Many of JMEP's funders are focused on strengthening all aspects of the Jewish community, which encompasses both religious and cultural expressions of Judaism.

Faith-Based Foundations that Fund Secular Grantees

Midwest Jewish Foundation

The Midwest Jewish Foundation (MJF) is a faith-based foundation that funds both Jewish initiatives and secular community organizations. MJF believes that a strong secular community equates to a stronger Jewish community, so crossing the religious-secular divide is a mutually beneficial endeavor. The MJF representative we interviewed was not Jewish but demonstrated familiarity with many Jewish ideals and scripture when speaking about the work of this organization. The employee shared that many staff members are also non-religious.

MJF does not accept requests for funding from secular organizations as they only fund these organizations on the basis of an established relationship. In other words, organizations without a relationship to MJF cannot apply for funding. Typically, community organizations will reach out to MJF with impromptu proposals on a one by one basis. Outside of faith-based endeavors, MJF commonly funds arts and culture organizations. For example, it will provide a grant for a community theater if a Jewish person is involved with a production or if the theater is using the funds it raises to support other local initiatives. This organization acknowledges that many other faith based organizations will require a faith statement when giving out grants; however, MCF does not do so and instead allocates a specific amount of money towards secular grants every year.

St. Peter's Community Fund

St. Peter's Community Fund (SPCF) is a Catholic foundation that funds both secular and faith-based organizations across many regions in the U.S. SPCF manages donor-advised funds to provide grants to donors' preferred organizations. The foundation reviews both the donors themselves as well as potential grantees before distributing funds. SPCF will not approve requested grantees if it discovers they hold values contrary to those of the Catholic Church. For example, if a donor wished to direct funds toward an organization supporting abortion rights or services, the request would be denied, as abortion clashes with the values of the Catholic Church.

The SPCF representative we interviewed disagreed with our categorization that the foundation funds "secular" grantees. They explained in their personal faith-based perspective, philanthropy and Catholic religious values are synonymous. For example, the foundation's tax records show that a community theater group recently received a grant. The SPCF representative explained that they considered all performing arts to be religious activity. To them, all music is inherently religious because of its association with Catholic ceremonies. Individuals are not required to identify as Catholic when they open a donor-advised fund with SPCF. However, the foundation prefers that the donor's views align with those of the Catholic Church and that they are involved in church-based activities. All current foundation staff identify as Catholic. The interviewee explained that SPCF is not opposed to hiring outside of the religion. They stated that staff happened to be Catholic because they sought employment with an organization that aligns with their own values, and not because the organization exclusively seeks out Catholic employees.

Bread and Light Foundation

At the Bread and Light Foundation (BLF), Evangelical values permeate all philanthropic practices. The foundation manages donor-advised funds. Its clients are evangelical Christians who typically prioritize giving to faith-based organizations – especially churches and evangelistic ministries. However, donors occasionally cross the religious-secular divide by directing funds toward humanitarian organizations, secular private K-12 schools, and donors' alma maters. One current executive explained that "well over 50%" of the funds directed through BLF are awarded to Christian organizations.

"[God] invites us to be stewards of His creation...coming alongside others, and making sure their needs are met."

- Bread and Light Foundation

All potential grantees receive a cursory vetting to ensure there is no "misalignment" with BLF's values and beliefs statement. This statement covers both theological tenets – a grantee cannot publicly deny that Jesus is the son of God – and sociopolitical stances typically associated with Evangelical Christianity – grantees must not endorse the expansion of abortion access or LGBTQ+ rights. Some issues raised in this statement are not relevant to every potential

grantee. However, if a web search reveals a public stance that does not align with BLF's values and beliefs, foundation representatives will attempt to contact the organization. The foundation reserves the right to override a donor's request to fund any particular organization.

The content of BLF's belief statement and the organization's practice of applying it to non-faith-based organizations is typical of many evangelical philanthropies. The executive we interviewed is not involved in the grant approval process, so he could not provide an estimate of how frequently organizations are denied funding. He suspected this does not happen often, as BLF's commitment to conservative Christian values is part of the appeal for potential donors. The executive described the foundation's approach as "countercultural" in its encouragement of radical "biblical stewardship." He explained that donors must give out of their abundance of resources to fulfill Christian principles: "God created everything, so everything is His, including us. He invites us to be stewards of His creation…coming alongside others, and making sure their needs are met." While donors usually manifest their generosity through intrafaith giving, funding schools and humanitarian organizations through BLF is also a key part of their embodiment of these faith principles.

Secular Grantees that Receive Funding from Faith-Based Foundations

Family Hope Food Pantry

Family Hope Food Pantry (FHFP) is an organization dedicated to eradicating food insecurity in a southern state of the U.S. FHFP is less than ten years old, so it has been addressing the fundamental needs of its community for a relatively short period of time. One current executive said that the organization is unique as the services it provides are easy for everyone to agree on, regardless of faith background. They shared that this organization works closely with low-income families who are Catholic, so localCatholic churches have a vested interest in funding their programs. FHFP's Catholic funders are also interested in the health of the disadvantaged mothers that the organization is serving; the food pantry provides some health resources specifically for pregnant women.

FHFP has positive relationships with its faith-based funders and even has Christian scripture in its values statement. This is not because the organization is religious; organization staff just believe that this scripture is a solid ethical principle to guide them. FHFP echoed the sentiments of another food bank that we interviewed when they explained that most religious groups see the provision of food as something that everyone can support as an essential service. This up-and-coming nonprofit organization appreciates the support it receives from faith based funders and plans to continue to partner with them in the future.

Region for Refugees

Region for Refugees (RFR) was founded by a religious group in the early 1900s, but has since shifted away from traditional faith practices to focus on serving the needs of their community. RFR provides educational opportunities, legal services, housing assistance, and more to the

refugees and immigrants within its community. A current member of the leadership team feels that RFR can better serve its clients by not holding an "outdated perspective" that views service provision as a means for integrating their faith into the community. Instead, its focus is now on maintaining positive relationships with donors to support the strengths of their "resilient" recipients. The interviewee states that they "provide those services as a means to support people's inherent strengths and to remove barriers. [They] are not saving refugees and immigrants from their challenges." Therefore, RFR operates in a secular manner that current leadership feels is better-suited to its mission of expanding the opportunities its region provides for refugees and immigrants. As the needs of the community and refugees are ever-changing due to political conflict, board members believe their mission statement should reflect this.

The leadership team member we interviewed joined RFR fairly recently. However, they have previously held similar roles with both faith-inspired and secular organizations. They do not want RFR to be inhibited by a "missionary mindset" that they believe would do more harm than good for the recipients of its services. RFR's work with other local nonprofits and donors across the faith-secular divide has been aided by its long-standing presence in the community. The team is committed to being good stewards of funding, which means delivering on its promises, providing updates on the people it is helping, and remaining transparent in its operations. This approach has been helpful in ensuring annual contract renewals and successful outreach to new donors.

When working with and receiving funding from faith-based foundations, the current leadership team member says "there are some religious organizations that require [them] to have a percentage of people on [their] board as the granter's religion in order to work with [them]." So, RFR does find the presence of faith amongst board members to be helpful in obtaining funds. Looking forward to the future and increasing philanthropic collaborations between faith-inspired and secular organizations, the interviewee believes that one major obstacle is the biases present in some nonprofits. They have observed an overarching pattern in nonprofit work that people will give to organizations when it "makes them feel good." Political differences and personal values can harm these connections, which requires those in nonprofit work to navigate religious-secular collaborations with a lot of care.

New Light Family Services

New Light Family Services (NLFS), based in a densely-populated West Coast suburb, is a nonprofit working to prevent family homelessness and improve food security in its region. The organization's connection to local faith communities traces back to its founding. NLFS began nearly a half-century ago when a handful of faith leaders and community members raised concerns about increasing family homelessness rates. For a brief time, the organization operated under a name that included the word "Christian." NLFS leaders selected a non-religious name when they decided to not be rooted in any particular faith practice and to continue operations in a secular manner. While its formal faith affiliation did not last, the circumstances of NLFS's founding set a precedent for close, meaningful relationships with

faith-based organizations in its community.

> ***"Our society is failing people through alienation... [I]ncreasing collaboration and partnerships is critical to have a multitude of impact."***
>
> *- Stewards of Charity*

New Light Family Services's longest-serving CEO was an active member of her church. She invited other congregants to become volunteers, donors, and board members. These people became invested in the NLFS mission and invited others – many of whom also belonged to various local faith communities – to join in their service. A current executive describes the partnerships that NLFS has with faith-based organizations as the "backbone" of many of their programs. While funding from these organizations contributes less than 10% of NLFS's total funding, these partnerships produce dedicated volunteers who "fulfill their faith through their service." The executive emphasized that NLFS's housing programs have very few formal requirements for entry, and clients come from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. For the most part, faith-based volunteers and donors respect these terms of service provision at NLFS. The executive reflected that she is pleased with NLFS's relationships with faith-based organizations. Faith communities have been a key source of support since the organization's founding, and she anticipates that these relationships will continue to flourish into the future.

Organizations Not Interviewed

We had a very high response rate to our requests for interviews. Out of 161 interview requests we sent, we received replies from 49 organizations. Of those 49, roughly half participated in an interview. The remaining half, a total of 23 organizations, declined to be interviewed. Explanations for these declines fell into several categories.

Some reasons cited by declining organizations do not relate to this project's core questions. Some politely declined due to a lack of resources or time for the team members most suitable for an interview of this nature. Others declined because they have policies against research interviews, viewing the time allotted for research projects to be an improper use of donors' financial resources.

Other organizations' justifications for declining related directly to our research questions. These responses demonstrated diversity among organizations, both in their organizational structures and views on the religious-secular divide. Several community foundations declined to be interviewed because they deal overwhelmingly with donor-advised funds. Thus, the funding we identified on tax records as going from a community foundation to a grantee across the religious-secular divide was not the foundation's choice per se, but rather at donors' discretion. Therefore, some organizations did not think they could speak accurately to the nature of the field. Our team did interview other community foundations, focusing on their discretionary funding of grantees across the divide. Other organizations declined because they simply did not think they could contribute; they felt their crossing of the divide was

uninteresting or uneventful.

Similarly, other declines are related because of diversity in identities, both those personally held by organizations and those ascribed to them by other organizations. Some organizations declined because they internally did not feel they fit into the category we ascribed to them: for instance, some organizations originally founded within an ethno-religious community did not feel truly "faith-based," but rather identified more strongly with their cultural community. Thus, while we flagged them as "faith-based" and as crossing the secular-religious divide to work with secular nonprofits, they identify as a community organization working with secular funders. In short, they feel they are not actually crossing a divide.

Additionally, some organizations declined because they stated outright that they had policies against crossing the divide (e.g., a secular funder stating they do not fund faith-based grantees), despite tax records clearly indicating that they had crossed the divide based on our definition of what constitutes a "faith-based" and a "secular" non-profit. To illustrate, a declining organization crossed the divide for an organization our research shows are faith-based, with a religious inspiration for the organization, but do not do religious programming. That grantor—who does not fund religious non-profits—had to have decided that this organization that we consider faith-based was not based on their own definition.. Thus, what constitutes crossing the line was not clear for those organizations.

These themes (organization diversity and complexities in identity) demonstrate some of the concerns and complexities that inspired this project. They also show how the divide is being crossed, both intentionally and not, by many organizations. These cross-divide relationships are worth further investigation, and we hope continued research allows for increased intentionality in those relationships.