

# 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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### **Thematic Analysis**

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?*

Although each interviewee had unique perspectives and concerns about religious-secular interactions in philanthropic spaces, five themes emerged that represent common experiences: (1) reliance on set criteria in funding policies to establish mutually beneficial relationships; (2) mission alignment across the divide; and (3) practical benefits of partnerships to support community well-being. We also note (4) diversity and complexity in the ways faith identity informs working partnerships and (5) that communication across the divide can remain difficult even for those who have crossed it.

### **1. Criteria Established in Funding Policies**

We found that both religious and secular foundations rely on a set of criteria within their funding policies to determine what nonprofits to support. These policies tend to be well-known internally, and may either be informally understood or established in writing. Regardless of whether the policies were officially documented, foundation employees involved in funding decisions are usually careful to follow them closely. While internal policy documents tend to be more detailed and definitive, truncated versions of a foundation's funding policies can often be found on its website, in RFPs, or in other materials available to grantees or donors. For both religious and secular foundations, actual funding practices can deviate from established policy. Several religious foundations we interviewed do not publicly advertise that they fund secular organizations, even though official documents indicate that they do.

We also found that some secular foundations make exclusions based on the form and intensity of faith integration in grantees' programs. Three secular foundations specifically cited "proselytizing" as a concern that would lead them to deny funding. Other foundations expressed an openness to fund humanitarian initiatives associated with churches – like soup kitchens and housing projects – but drew the line at funding programs in which participants are obligated to participate in prayer or other expressions of worship. However, for both religious and secular foundations, shared values are usually more important in making funding decisions than specific affiliation labels.

## ***2. Mission Alignment***

In discussion with both faith-based and secular organizations, we found they are willing to partner with organizations to achieve shared goals regardless of religious or secular affiliation. For example, churches commonly partner with religiously unaffiliated organizations because they both hope to address the issue of hunger in their communities. A secular food pantry with existing infrastructure for addressing hunger, such as distribution systems, relationships with local grocery stores, logistics companies, and community centers, is a logical partner for a church whose congregation is seeking service opportunities like holding food drives or supplying volunteer hours. In short, mission alignment may be a greater indicator of partnership potential than an organization's religious or secular identity.

Partnerships between religious and secular organizations often stem from interpersonal relationships. For example, a faith-based organization might apply for funding from a secular foundation after members of that faith community volunteer with the funding organization. Similarly, secular foundations were more likely to fund religious organizations when they were familiar with staff or volunteers within the organization.

The importance of interpersonal relationships to funding decisions is illustrated by an evangelical foundation in the Midwest that explained that it does not send out a request for grant applications. Rather, its funding decisions are made based solely on recommendations by its staff members. Staff members tended to recommend funding for organizations that they had worked with previously. We also interviewed a few organizations that would describe themselves as faith-based, but their internal and external faith expression had waned over time. These organizations tended to be more willing to fund secular organizations than those faith-based organizations who remained firmly committed to faith-inspired programming and messaging.

## ***3. Practical Partnerships for Community Well-being***

Organizations reported practical benefits of collaborating across the religious-secular divide. Some secular foundations conveyed a willingness to fund faith-based organizations that are integral to the well-being of local communities. The faith based grantees' devotion to their religion guides their missions and approaches to serving the community, even when programming is not explicitly religious.

For example, Wildflower is a Christian grantee that is committed to showing love to the people they serve, which the organization describes as a natural expression of their roots in the Christian faith. Wildflower has a strong philanthropic relationship with a secular funder that typically does not fund faith-based organizations. However, the funder was impressed that Wildflower consistently “practices what they preach” through the love and acceptance it shows to others. Faith-based grantees’ motivation to address community needs also comes from the spiritual growth they experience while in service to others. One Christian grantee remarked that they derive their motivation from God because He also wants to see community members thrive.

Other faith groups place similar value in community well-being. Some Jewish organizations we spoke with connect the health of the local religious community to the health of the whole community. Faith-based nonprofits have intrinsic motivators that are deeply tied to the personal religious beliefs of the organization and staff, often resulting in committed and energized efforts toward community service and advocacy.

Secular foundations may choose to fund faith-based organizations as an effective solution to address needs in certain communities. In rural communities, churches commonly serve as the locus for social services. As a result, a secular foundation may fund faith-based organizations as a realistic means to achieve social equity in rural communities. Likewise, some low-income and minority communities have deep ties to religious organizations that provide resources and support. Faith-based organizations with historic community roots may intimately understand local needs and have established relationships with community members. In these situations, funding faith-based organizations may be a practical use of resources for foundations whose missions focus on addressing justice and inequity in underserved communities.

#### ***4. Diversity of Connections***

Some religious nonprofits were more likely to maintain working relationships with secular organizations than others. Some secular funders generously support faith-based grantees who share their values, while others generally prefer to support secular grantees. Secular foundations’ most cited concern when working with faith-based organizations are their conversion or proselytizing practices.

For example, Christian and Muslim organizations run into friction because of faith-sharing practices more often than Jewish organizations. The Jewish organizations we spoke to emphasized that conversion efforts are almost never part of their faith practice. While we were unable to interview any Muslim organizations, other nonprofits we interviewed that have interacted with the Muslim community observed that they rely mostly on same-faith communities and mosques for funding. Other groups such as Christian and Jewish organizations are more likely to accept funds from sources outside their own communities. Both faith-based and secular organizations reported maintaining strong funding relationships with organizations that shared their affiliation status within the religious-secular divide.

Our analysis revealed differing patterns in faith groups' engagement with distinct areas of nonprofit activity. Religious funders are more inclined to fund secular grantees who share most of their values even if they do not share a faith affiliation. Organizations involved in food security, environmental conservation, and community development seemed to appeal to the values of a diverse array of religious funders. Some faith groups gravitated more than others toward certain social causes. These differing interests may relate directly to religious groups' doctrinal beliefs, as in the case of a Buddhist organization hosting nondenominational mindfulness workshops. They may also reflect a combination of theological and political activism. Catholics and evangelical Christians' strong associations with the pro-life movement may lead to increased involvement with secular nonprofits providing prenatal and family services.

We also observed that the religious affiliations of the foundation's leadership determine which faith groups receive the most support. Some interviewees were open about sharing how their own beliefs affect the way they fund grantees. Others gave only subtle clues, and some did not seem to know if their personal beliefs might influence their organization's funding decisions. For example, a director of a secular foundation we spoke with recalled that a former president, who was Jewish, was very hesitant to support Christian grantees that espoused unpopular social or political stances. A high-ranking executive of another secular foundation expressed that as an evangelical Christian, he believes he has a better understanding of the evangelical community, which allows him to make better-informed funding decisions. Furthermore, he shared that his organization was founded by a Christian and has historically prioritized funding Christian grantees.

## ***5. Communication Challenges***

Interviewees shared the ongoing challenges in communicating across the religious-secular divide. Every organization we interviewed had a funding pattern we sought to examine (i.e. faith-based organizations funding or receiving funds from secular organizations and vice versa). Yet, most of the organizations reported "staying in their [religious or secular] lane" when it comes to funding practices. Eighty-three percent of participating grantees reported receiving most of their funds from organizations that shared their faith (or non-religious) affiliation. Similarly, 84% of foundations we interviewed reported directing most of their grants toward organizations of a similar faith (or non-religious) affiliation. While this data cannot be generalized for the entire nonprofit sector, it points toward a possible trend of organizations, even those that occasionally bridge the religious-secular divide, largely keeping funds on their side of the divide.

Some interviewees expressed a desire for more interfaith and religious-secular partnerships. Grace Community Center (GCC), a faith-based grantee providing a broad range of basic needs and education programs, reported feeling misunderstood by secular foundations they have approached for funding. In the view of GCC's executive director, the organization's faith practices energize their work and strengthen their philosophy that every person they serve is

worthy of respect and dignity. GCC hosts some faith programming and references Jesus in its mission statement. GCC's executive director recognizes that this reference to Jesus may be concerning to a potential secular funder, but she hopes that open dialogue would assuage any fears: "If they just let me talk about [my faith] a little bit, I think we can get over that."

Wildflower, which has similar programs as GCC, reported having similar communication blocks in its early days. Wildflower originally operated under a name that included the word "Ministries." Some secular or corporate funders were reluctant to even consider funding Wildflower, which current leadership attributes to concerns about the explicit faith affiliation the original name carried. One secular foundation decided to conduct a site visit and was persuaded to fund Wildflower after connecting with staff members and observing firsthand the nature of its programs. This process took time and energy, perhaps more than the average foundation is interested in spending on any one organization. Yet, these interviewees and others emphasized that this type of open communication and intentional relationship-building is key to the success of building religious-secular funding partnerships.

The organizations we interviewed were generally satisfied with the secular-faith partnerships they have established. However, some reported past negative experiences with bridging the divide, leading to the establishment of stronger boundaries or screening practices when engaging with organizations outside of their own religious/secular tradition. One secular community foundation recounted that donors have expressed concerns about faith-based organizations they have funded in the past, usually about controversial behavior or beliefs expressed by the organization. This foundation now applies heightened scrutiny to potential faith-based grantees to pre-empt donor concerns, resulting in faith-based organizations being screened out more frequently.

Another organization, a secular social services provider, had past issues with volunteers from faith communities inviting clients to their religious services. Many of the organization's clients had no faith affiliation or were part of a minority religious group. Those clients felt obligated to attend the religious services, in part because the donors and volunteers were associated with the nonprofit. The clients thought their refusal to attend would negatively impact their eligibility for the organization's programs. An organization representative speculated that these volunteers' overstepping came from good intentions; in her view, faith-based partners have "hearts of gold, and they want to come in and help with everything... [but] we have to keep boundaries, we want to make sure these families keep their dignity." While this organization maintains their strong relationships with local faith communities, other organizations might be inclined to withdraw from such partnerships after similar incidents. Both foundations and grantees could benefit from making their expectations clear and respecting established boundaries for these religious-secular partnerships to endure and flourish.