Needs assessment is a critical component of strategic planning and a powerful way for social workers to integrate their faith and practice by collaborating with faith-based organizations (FBOs). FBOs, including churches, provide critical human services and benefit from systematic needs assessment and evaluation processes (LaPiana, 2008), just like their secular counterparts. This article describes how social workers conducted a needs assessment with a local congregation utilizing proven methods (Dudley, 2014; Posavac& Carey, 1997; Witkin&Altschund, 1995) that can be generalized throughout the profession and faith-based organizations. This article includes a description of data collection, management, and analysis. Collaboration is defined as an approach that individualizes churches as FBOs, recognizing their expertise and the importance of wide buy-in from stakeholders. The eight-step process is an elaboration on the Multimethod Church-Based Assessment Process (MCAP) that includes consulting to generate specific questions (Steps 1-4), collecting information (Steps 5-7), and providing feedback (Step 8) (Dominguez & McMinn, 2003) (See Appendix A). The specific steps are 1) qualitative data analysis by church staff; 2) social worker collaboration to perform thematic analysis; 3) survey construction based on themes; 4) survey pilot; 5) data collection; 6) data management; 7) data analysis; 8) data reporting/recommendation (Dudley, 2014;

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LaPiana, 2008; Posavac& Carey, 1997; Rubin &Babbie, 2005; United Way of America, 1996; Witkin&Altschuld, 1995). This article describes how this plan can be replicated as well as providing examples of results from the needs assessment. A full case study of this needs assessment is in NACSW Conference Proceedings (Placido& Cecil, 2012).

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. (James 1: 6-8, NIV)

Faith-based organizations (fbos) that provide human services must fearlessly ask the important questions about what it is doing and where it is going. FBOs, including churches, are currently providing important community and human services and can avoid double-mindedness by performing needs assessment, a critical part of strategic planning. Social workers, with our emphasis on relationship, strengths perspective, and problem solving, are optimally positioned to assist these FBOs in performing needs assessments in the context of relational and strengths perspectives. This also provides an opportunity for social workers to integrate faith and practice. This integration channels the value-laden relational aspect of both Christian faith and social work (Northrop & Perry, 1985; Langer, 2003) into best practice approaches to needs assessment (Dudley, 2014; LaPiana, 2008; Posavac& Carey, 1997; Rubin &Babbie, 2005; United Way of America, 1996; Witkin&Altschuld, 1995). When done well, needs assessments of this kind can serve to validate and deepen the FBO identity and values, as well as carefully set the stage for growth and change.

FBOs as Powerful Sources of Human Services FBOs are powerful sources of human services because they mobilize volunteers and provide resources such as funding and facilities to the community. They are often trusted and engaged members of the community with established relationships. Thus, they are able to meet human service needs and become vital referral sources. The Lawndale Christian Health Center is an outreach of the Lawndale Community Church located in an underserved community of Chicago. It provides medical, mental health, and other related social work services to people with limited means and options (Serrano, 2003). Holland (2010) notes the work of The Riverside 81 Church in New York City whose Social Service Ministry provides assistance to those in need, a food pantry, a barber training program, clothing distribution, homeless shelter, and HIV testing and support. The Salvation Army is a highly noted FBO that provides care and support to the needy and those facing difficulties in multiple countries (Whalen, 1992). History affirms that with careful planning, FBOs serve as powerful sources of community service that avoid stagnation and isolation. As James 2:17 (ESV) states, “Faith without works is dead.” Additionally, Holt (1922) reminds us that “religious experience cannot be held in a compartment by itself… A vigorous Christianity has always projected its great ideas about God, salvation, and human duty into the ordinary relationships of human living” (p. 5). “Almost all modern social services can be traced back to roots in religious organizations” (Garland, 1992, p. 1). Examples of these efforts include:

• The Methodist Settlement Movement in the mid-1800s “staffed outreach programs to the most marginalized inhabitants of the inner cities” (Kreutziger, 2008, p. 81).

• In the early 1900s, the Baptist Training School Settlement in Louisville provided aid to the immigrant communities (Scales & Kelly, 2012).

• Phoebe Palmer, a holiness evangelist, founded the Five Points Mission in New York City in 1850 (Garland, 1992).

Needs Assessment Critical to Strategic Planning

Needs assessments are critical to planning, but must be anchored first in the organization’s identity; this includes their mission and vision. Leaders should look “for ways to understand how an organization is perceived to ensure positive impressions formation and transmission” (Aust, 2004, p. 515). It is the mission that points toward needed improvements. This is a comforting concept for many facing the hard work of needs assessments and evaluations of many kinds. Change requires motivation and can often create the perception that traditionally favored methods are facing abandonment. Conditions for excellent planning emerge when a needs assessment begins with validation for current successes and strengths, as well as an emphasis on collaboration and consensus building, while also conveying a strong sense of confidence in the available tools. The social worker finds helpful tools and understanding in areas of basic research, outcome measurement, organizational change and motivation, as well as needs assessment. Needs assessment enables human service organizations, such as FBOs, to strategically grow and change and avoid pitfalls that lead to apathy and attrition (Posavac& Carey, 1997). A high quality needs assessment includes a process (Witkins&Altshuld, 1995) that systematically reflects priorities of stakeholders (Dudley, 2014), includes

the best data collection and analysis methods possible (Rubin &Babbie, 2005), clearly specifies and quantifies services (United Way of America, 1996), and accounts for the complex nature of motivation and needs (e.g., actual vs. perceived) (Posavac& Carey, 1997). Note that several of these sources are not specifically from needs assessment literature. For example, the United Way of America’s (1996) logic model is an excellent tool for an FBO to specify and quantify its identity and update plans for change. Once organizational identity is established and affirmed, the FBO can turn its attention to more efficiently and effectively serving its congregants and community. This orientation leads to enhanced capacity to meet community needs. Hair and Walsh-Bowers (1992) describe ideal change and growth characteristics, such as shared leadership, flexibility, openness to change, and responsiveness to needs. They state that FBOs “can promote the aims of the community mental health by developing resources to meet their needs” (Hair & Walsh-Bowers, 1992, p. 289)

Social Work Collaboration with FBOs Spressart (1992) states, “Social change in America has been spurred on by organized religion” (p. 106). While it is important to remember that the culture and mission of FBOs are unique, FBO involvement in social service is consistent with current social work practice and past social service endeavors. This mutual focus of social work and FBOs provides an ongoing opportunity to develop processes that will allow them to effectively work together. Social workers can provide assistance with organizational development, program evaluation, and administrative oversight, as well as counseling (Edwards, 2003), consultation, and social action (Watkins, 1992; Ferguson, 1992; Bailey, 1992; Spressart, 1992). Garland and Yancey (2012) maintain that FBOs have “several characteristics that taken together make congregations a unique setting for social work practice” (p. 313). This collaboration occurs in a voluntary setting, values the laity as well as the clergy, and considers the unique religious culture (Garland, 1992). In this spirit of collaboration, the social worker individualizes to FBOs by utilizing varying methods of needs assessment. Some focus on the task environment rather than the internal workings of the agency (Northrop & Perry, 1985). Others emphasize organizational identity (OI). Aust’s (2004) assessment of the United Church of God attempted to determine its “communicated values in order to gain a sense of its OI” (p. 515). Hair & Walsh-Bower (1992) utilize multiple methods such as a nominal group technique (NGT), a structured group interview, and a community forum in their congregational assessment process. The Multimethod Church-based Assessment Process (MCAP) is “a flexible idiographic system that allows each church to craft a customized assessment for its particular needs and strengths.”(Dominguez & McMinn, 2003, p. 334). Its three stages are gen- 83 erating specific questions, collecting information, and providing feedback. The focus is a collaborative process that allows identification of important issues and customizes an assessment to those areas.

Method

The methodology for this needs assessment builds on a number of proven approaches to needs assessment and evaluation (Dudley, 2014; LaPiana, 2008; Posavac& Carey, 1997; Rubin &Babbie, 2005; United Way of America, 1996; Witkin&Altschuld, 1995). This includes various phases as well as data collection and analysis approaches. The social worker adapted the MCAP Model (Dominguez & McMinn, 2003) to carefully construct a needs assessment methodology in collaboration with church staff. The eight-step process elaborates on the three-stage MCAP in the following way: consulting to generate specific questions (Steps 1-4), collecting information (Steps 5-7), and providing feedback (Step 8) (Dominguez & McMinn, 2003). The specific steps are: 1) qualitative data analysis by church staff; 2) social worker collaboration to perform thematic analysis; 3) survey construction based on themes; 4) survey pilot; 5) data collection; 6) data management; 7) data analysis; and 8) data reporting/recommendation (Dudley, 2014; LaPiana, 2008; Posavac& Carey, 1997; Rubin &Babbie, 2005; United Way of America, 1996; Witkin&Altschuld, 1995). Note that collaboration and individualizing are stressed throughout this process. The social worker carefully explained this process to church staff, including timelines on deliverables.

Church Staff Qualitative Data Analysis Before a specific and individualized survey was constructed, the church staff walked through a broader, more qualitative exploration of the areas they needed to explore. At this point, teams were established to meet and formulate questions to bring back to the broader group. After much discussion, a set of open-ended questions was collected to be used as a structured interview guide with church members. They were ordered from more broad to more specific. Members of the staff scheduled interviews with church members to get their impressions on the areas in the structured interview guide. Topics on the interview discussion guide included meaningful events, unmet community needs, necessary changes, things that should never Social Work and Faith Based Organization Collaboration 84 Social Work & Christianity change, most influential aspects of church, and favorite activities outside of church. The social worker built on this work to do deeper qualitative exploration and thematic analysis

Collaboration for Thematic Analysis and Survey Construction

Once interview discussion guide data was collected, the social worker collaborated with church staff to identify themes that would serve as the outline for the survey (See Appendix B). Dudley (2014) asserts that measures in needs assessments must capture perceptions and motivation, as well as allow participants to prioritize preferences. There were two steps to the thematic analysis. First, interviewers provided their impressions. Second, interview transcripts were analyzed. Each response was grouped in terms of type and frequency. The top five themes under each question served as options on the survey that members could prioritize. For instance, under the question/theme of community service, the top five themes are collaboration with community agencies, assisting the needy, working with youth, pool resources with other churches, and missions. Each question also includes other as an option, where the participant may write in additional preferences. Participants indicate, in order, their top three preferences on each theme. The survey uses the themes as dependent variables and gender, age, membership status, and university/seminary status as independent variables. To improve internal consistency, the survey was piloted with the church board, which led to minor, non-substantive revisions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were strategically collected at a high attendance event using the survey. This included an announcement of the informed consent nature of the survey. Survey data were entered into a spreadsheet. There is a column for each independent variable (e.g., Gender) and six (6) columns for each dependent variable (e.g., Community Service) question. These six columns are for the six selections (including other) under each question. Each row represents a different participant. Once an independent variable is coded, prioritized data (1, 2, or 3) is entered for each response given. This allows the researcher to derive sums, means, and frequencies. For means, one (1) represents highest priority while three (3) represents lower priority (but still a priority). For frequency, the percentage reflects how often a particular item is in the top three selections. Following is an example of how these results are presented to the church board.

Example of Needs

Assessment Results 85 The following is an excerpt from actual results provided to the FBO. See Placido and Cecil (2012) for full results. Question 3 asked about perceived community needs that go overlooked. Results are displayed in Table 1. In order of average priority, congregants selected Other, Increased Involvement with Youth in the Community, Greater Involvement with Other Churches, Greater Involvement in Missions, Assisting the Needy, and Increased Involvement with Community Groups/Agencies. Write-ins under Other included: Availability of People to Meet Needs, Community Involvement, Fellowship with Community, and Community Outreach. Greater Involvement with Other Churches and Assisting the Needy were selected with high frequency. Increased Involvement with Youth in the Community and Increased Involvement with Community Groups/Agencies were selected with moderate frequency. Greater Involvement in Missions was noted with low frequency. Other was noted with very low frequency. Note that Greater Involvement with Other Churches and Assisting the Needy were both high priority and high frequency selections.

Table 1: Community Needs Preferences

Table 1: Community Needs Preferences Sum Average

Frequency Increase involvement with community 51 2.32 22 (48%)

Assist the needy 56 2.00 28 (61%)

Increase involvement with youth 44 1.83 24 (52%)

Collaborate with other FBOs 56 1.87 30 (65%)

More involvement in missions 19 1.90 10 (22%)

Other 7 1.75 4 (9%)

Other included: availability of people to meet needs, community involvement, fellowship with community, and community outreach.

Process Observations

The implementation of the needs assessment with this FBO had a number of positive outcomes and challenges to navigate; it also raised other dynamics to be aware of in the unique setting of an FBO. This collaborative approach fostered a cooperative spirit which enhanced the involvement of the congregation. A strategic use of hospitality was utilized to enhance involvement. For example, the church sponsored a potluck on the day of the survey administration to enhance participation in the survey. The team-based procedure provided greater investment by the pastoral staff and fostered greater involvement with lay members in instrument development. Because the procedure allowed the use of data previously obtained by the Social Work and Faith Based Organization Collaboration 86 Social Work & Christianity lay committee, it assisted in the development of an instrument that had better application to the church’s needs.

A number of issues arose in the development process of the procedure. At times, there developed unrealistic expectations as to what the instrument could measure. This required the social worker to aid the staff and board in focusing on those aspects of the project that were measurable and important to the church. The pastoral staff and board needed assistance in better prioritizing the areas of focus to be measured and setting priorities in the application of the findings of the study. Also, they needed to be reminded that the survey was a “snapshot” of the congregation on that one particular Sunday morning.

Social work in this context has unique considerations and can be time consuming compared to similar projects in other organizations. Regular meetings with the pastors and the church board are required to keep current with assessment developments. Awareness of the roles of pastoral and lay leadership is helpful in understanding leadership structure and assessment planning. An awareness of the church’s calendar was essential in determining the strategies, implementation and scheduling of the assessment. Most planning occurred in the summer months, while the project was implemented in the fall. It is important to use a model that cooperatively develops an assessment with the church. It requires culture awareness in order to plan and implement the assessment in a way that is meaningful and helpful to the church.

Discussion

An individualized needs assessment performed by a competent social worker that includes systematic best practices plays a critical role in the success of the FBO (Dudley, 2014; LaPiana, 2008; Posavac& Carey, 1997; United Way of America, 1996; Witkin&Altschuld, 1995). The application of needs assessment procedures to such settings can assist FBOs in understanding their capabilities and facilitating informed planning. McMinn, Aikens, and Lish (2003) propose that advanced competence includes holistic and integrative care that fosters an awareness of spirituality and shared values with the FBO. In this way, this needs assessment is a good example of an ethical integration of the social worker’s faith and practice. This methodology worked well for this needs assessment. Data collection and analysis assisted in capturing the perception and motivation of the participants and enabled the social worker to help FBO personnel prioritize those issues that are important to them. The social worker tailored these methodological approaches around these important characteristics by building a quantitative survey after thorough consultation and analysis of qualitative data. Percentiles and frequency statistics were ideal for this approach. The social worker leaned heavily on theological training and self-

awareness to competently develop authentic working relationships (McMinn, Aikens &Lish, 2003; McMinn, Meeks, Canning &Pozzi, 2001). Plante (2005) proposed that training for professionals should “include training in religious diversity” (p. 78). Some maintain that to effectively serve FBOs, “the first step is determining what services are appealing to clergy” (Lish, Fitzsimmons, McMinn, & Root, 2003, p. 297). The development of effective community, shared values, and mutual respect are necessary to form useful alliances with FBOs (McMinn, Ammons, McLaughlin et. al., 2005; McMinn, Runner, Fairchild, Lefter&Suntay, 2005). Some faith traditions may not utilize secular helping professions if they do not include explicit components of Christian faith (Plante, 2008). Collaboration with FBOs must “overcome several barriers that have been erected due to years of tension between the disciplines” (Bland, 2003, p. 299). Barriers include a lack of awareness of important church teachings and issues (Plante, 1999), limited trust of the professionals by the church (Bene, Walsh, McMinn, Dominguez, & Aikens, 2000), financial practices (Edwards, Lim, McMinn, & Dominguez, 1999), and the unidirectional nature of the relationship (McMinn, Chaddock, Edwards, Lim & Campbell, 1998). A needs assessment can be a useful and powerful source of reflection and information for the FBO. Such an assessment can in itself initiate change through the recommendations that are given and the process that is experienced by its members. This FBO initiated a number of change processes resulting from the needs assessment they experienced.

Examples of Outcomes

This needs assessment prompted and informed a number of change processes for this FBO. Some of these changes had clear consensus and were relatively easy to implement. Others have consensus but will require some time in terms of resources and process. Still others may not be a high priority or lack consensus but are now items on agendas across FBO committees. An example of change with clear consensus and easy implementation included the findings regarding student attendees. The findings of this assessment indicated that a significant portion (40%) of attendees at Sunday services were students. The vast majority (75%) consider themselves as regular attenders rather than visitors. These findings led the church to continue to support the off-campus Wednesday night meetings in order to minster to students in a neutral site. They would also maintain the continued use of graduate students to preach and teach on a periodic basis. The FBO also initiated a new policy that would routinely place one to two students on the church board to advise the church regarding ministries to students. An example of change with clear consensus, but that will take time and a resource to implement is a need for enhanced involvement and communication. Findings indicated a need for improved management, Social Work and Faith Based Organization Collaboration 88 Social Work & Christianity enhanced member involvement, and increased communication between various ministries of the church. This data led to a streamlined model of church governance in which the board is the main administrative body for completing tasks. To further simplify, church officers, such as deacons and trustees, temporarily joined the board until member census grows to the point that it is self-sustaining. Finally, there were areas that came up enough to be concerns, but do not reflect consensus that are being reviewed by the board for further exploration. One idea to enhance attendance, participation, and community orientation was to phase in community-oriented children’s programming. It will not be implemented at this time, but illustrates areas for future consideration.

Limitations

Limitations include a small convenience sample from a single denomination, which did not lend itself to inferential statistical analysis (Rubin &Babbie, 2005). Therefore external validity (generalizability) is limited. Also, social work collaboration with congregations is not widely researched, resulting in few established norms. Internal validity is limited due to the use of a non-standardized instrument, although the survey items were carefully constructed and piloted with the pastoral staff and board (Rubin &Babbie, 2005). This study also does not account for process differences related to denominational values. Some faith traditions emphasize community service more than others. There may be a tendency to under- or over-report concerns based on the relational nature of a smaller group in a rural setting. Anonymous completion of surveys fosters honest responses, but also limits potential follow up studies.

Conclusion use of a research-based plan, accessibility, a flexible and customizable approach, careful data collection, management and analysis, and sensitivity to cultural norms. This study explored and examined both archival and original data collected from this church’s congregation. It included the development of a collaborative needs assessment process. Further research is necessary in order to systematically understand the needs of FBOs as well as the use of needs assessment procedures in church and/or FBO settings. This needs assessment provided an opportunity for further research, such as the development of more formalized needs assessment procedures tailored to FBOs. Although generalizability is a limitation, this needs assessment is a 89 blend of accepted Christian and social work values with best practices for needs assessment and evaluation. The FBO is a collection of faith communities with a common mission. It is important to view FBO groups, such as congregations, as unique “communities of believers” (Bland, 2003, p. 78). This requires an adaptive approach that shows sensitivity and flexibility in assisting such groups. Ongoing theological training for the social worker fosters sensitivity and respectful collaboration (CCPC: McMinn, Meek, Canning, &Pozzi, 2001). Therefore, competence, flexibility, and sensitivity in the context of authentic relationship are the key elements of a successful FBO needs assessment. v References Aust, P. J. (2004). Communicated values as indicators of organization identity: