

6-1-2002

Cooperative Extension and Faith-Based Organizations: Building Social Capital

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Recommended Citation

Prins, E., & Ewert, D. (2002). Cooperative Extension and Faith-Based Organizations: Building Social Capital. *The Journal of Extension, 40*(3), Article 3. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol40/iss3/3>

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June 2002 // Volume 40 // Number 3 // Commentary // 3COM2



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Cooperative Extension and Faith-Based Organizations: Building Social Capital

Abstract

This article explores the historical relationship between Cooperative Extension and faith-based organizations. Using historical texts, the authors show that since the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, Cooperative Extension has worked with faith-based organizations, such as congregations, to promote community renewal. Extension and congregations--then and now--share a deep commitment to building community. The authors conclude that by remembering its historical roots, Extension can renew a vision for creating a just, democratic society. In this way, Extension can help create healthier communities.

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Introduction

The national debate over the role of government in supporting faith-based community development has obscured one simple fact: since the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, Cooperative Extension has worked with faith-based organizations--particularly local congregations--to facilitate community renewal. Although congregations and other faith-based organizations are found in nearly every neighborhood, some question whether Cooperative Extension should collaborate on a shared community-building agenda.

The revitalization of local communities is becoming a national priority for social theorists and political leaders across the ideological spectrum. Books such as Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) have captured the public's imagination. Strengthening social networks that foster collective action for mutual benefit--building social capital--Putnam argues, will revitalize communities and meet human needs.

The literature suggests that faith-based organizations play an important role in building social capital by transforming rural, urban, and suburban communities (Cisneros, 1996; Clay & Wright, 2000; Jung et al., 1998; SEEDCO, 1988). Extension and congregations--then and now--share a deep commitment to building community. We argue that Extension and faith-based organizations can collaborate to help people solve local problems, thereby creating a more just, democratic society, without compromising the integrity of either institution.

The Decline

From its inception, the Cooperative Extension System has partnered with churches to revitalize communities. Because Extension worked with "small local units" (Bailey, 1907) to inspire problem-

solving initiatives and develop leadership, collaborating with churches made Extension's work more effective (Federal Council, 1916). This cooperation still takes place today, albeit quietly.

Several factors explain the decline of this collaboration. First, many past Extension and church leaders, especially adherents of the Social Gospel (social justice-oriented Christianity that flourished in the late 1800s to early 1900s), understood their work as organizing people and developing their capacity to build a just, democratic society (Peters, 1999). Agricultural and religious programs were part of the effort to create a materially *and* spiritually rich rural culture. The church was perceived as "vital to the solution of the rural problem, because the things the church stands for are vital to a permanent rural civilization" (Butterfield, 1911, p. vi). Some of that democratic vision has been lost.

Second, because American culture relegates faith to the private realm (Carter, 1993), we may ignore (or miss) the public dimensions of congregations' work. And last, mutual skepticism and fear of violating the separation of church and state may stifle legitimate, productive collaboration between Extension and faith-based organizations.

By examining its historical roots, Extension can resuscitate a vision for strengthening democratic society and imagine new ways to work with faith-based organizations to strengthen their public work and build healthier communities.

Strengthening Communities

In the early 1900s, people who wanted to strengthen rural communities championed church-Extension collaboration. In response to the "state of arrested development" (Bailey, 1907, p. 7) in rural areas, President Theodore Roosevelt formed the Commission on Country Life. The Commission stated, "Any consideration of the problem of rural life that leaves out of account the function and possibilities of the church and of related institutions would be grossly inadequate...because, from the purely social point of view, the church is fundamentally a necessary institution in country life" (Morris, 1916, p. 127).

Some community leaders in the early 1900s rightly criticized churches for decadence, dogma, and disconnection from community life (Bailey, 1907). Instead, they envisioned churches as a revitalizing agents and institutions that existed *for* the community. As Earp (1914) noted, "All the great leaders in the Rural Life movement admit that the country church is the most important factor in the solution of the problem of the betterment of our rural civilization" (p. 157).

As some rural churches worked toward this vision, they sought to improve public health, infrastructure, education, farming and Extension, community planning, and social life and to establish credit unions and farmer cooperatives (Federal Council, 1916; Landis & Willard, 1933; *Manifesto*, 1939). Clergy frequently led these efforts. For example, a pastor in Upstate New York organized a community club that established a national bank, paved a street, consolidated several schools, and planned to establish a manufacturing plant and start a ferry across the Hudson (Vogt, 1921).

The Nature of Church/Extension Collaboration

Church and Extension leaders collaborated for several reasons. Churches wanted to work with the new agricultural and educational systems to achieve greater spiritual, moral, and social impact. Their joint work focused on shared concerns, such as halting rural communities' decline.

Through their joint efforts, Extension agents and ministers became "co-workers" and "allies" (Federal Council, 1916; Landis & Willard, 1933). Agricultural colleges and land-grant universities provided education for rural leaders, especially clergy. For three years, Cornell University conducted a summer school in which ninety leaders learned about rural sociology, the Country Church Movement, and other topics (Earp, 1914). During the 1920s and 30s, seminaries and state colleges sponsored interdenominational summer schools to:

assist ministers in acquiring new insight into tested methods of town and country church work and understanding of the trends and problems in modern country life; to develop a fellowship among those engaged in rural service; to develop contacts between agricultural leaders, particularly those in extension work, and rural ministers (Landis & Willard, 1933, p. 119).

Instructors taught topics such as leadership training in religious and adult education, agricultural economics, inter-church cooperation, and women's contribution to leadership (Landis & Willard, 1933, p. 119-120). West Virginia University Extension coordinated a continuing education program for religious leaders, who studied philosophical subjects for 24 weeks and could earn a diploma (Landis & Willard, 1933).

For several decades, Extension and churches found ways to work toward common goals, seeing each other as allies and co-workers in the struggle to rebuild rural communities. Understanding the foundations of this relationship offers insights that can shape Extension's work today.

Building Social Capital

Social capital--the "features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1993)--fosters collective action and civic participation and helps build vibrant communities. Congregations have the core elements of social capital that promote community renewal (Ammerman, 1997; Putnam, 1993). They "mobilize the disadvantaged" and enhance political participation by giving people--across race, gender, and class--relatively equal opportunities to develop civic skills (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995, p. 333).

Black churches are prominent in faith-based community development. Historically, they have met physical, economic, social, and spiritual needs and promoted leadership development and political mobilization (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Consequently, King & Hustedde (1993) suggest that Extension educators can draw upon black churches as a "free space" to promote public dialogue and problem solving.

Congregation-based community organizing coalitions (e.g., the Industrial Areas Foundation, Pacific Institute for Community Organization) can mobilize social networks and build social capital by facilitating inter-racial cooperation based on common religious values and symbols (Warren, 1995). By working with congregations, these coalitions have enabled millions of citizens to develop leadership skills and solve community problems (Wood, 1997), thereby strengthening democracy.

Shared Commitments

Berger and Neuhaus (1996, p. 52) argue that we should strengthen mediating structures, or those institutions that stand between individuals and the "larger institutions of public life," such as congregations and Extension systems. To the extent that congregations and faith-based organizations work to benefit all (regardless of personal belief), promote respect for others across differences, and provide the marginalized with leadership opportunities, we should strengthen those initiatives while taking care not to prefer or discriminate against any religion.

Although the world has changed dramatically since the early 1900s, many Extension and religious leaders today still care about the same things--the well-being and vitality of their communities, the development of local leaders, civic participation, and building relationships of trust, reciprocity, and mutual respect. Extension and congregations work in distinct ways and have different purposes. However, history shows that Extension educators and people of faith have many shared commitments and that--together--they can build more democratic communities.

Conclusion

Strengthening the public work of mediating structures such as churches can help strengthen civil society. In this sense, Extension's failure to engage with religious institutions hinders community renewal. If Extension wishes to build communities in which all people can flourish, we should consider how we might join forces with congregations and faith-based organizations--without religious preference--to achieve this shared vision.

Collaboration holds promise for Extension and faith-based organizations. Their strong social capital could fortify Extension's work. As community-based organizations, they are woven into the social fabric of local neighborhoods; many of their members understand community needs and are highly motivated to solve them. Many faith-based organizations are already working to solve local problems, so why should Extension not revive its historical collaboration?

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Discussion

Author: [John Mesko](#)

It's refreshing to see an article like this. There is a fear that any attempt by Extension to join churches in the effort to build strong communities will be a violation of what many think is supposed to be a separation between church and government. Let's do right by our communities, and work towards the mutual goal of strong healthy communities leading toward a strong society...

Date: 6/25/2002

Author: [Kay Haaland](#)

Interesting. I agree that it is great to have a ready-built community of folks to work with. I have run up against one barrier that I take seriously and it has to do with civil rights. According to civil rights instructions we received in the early 90's, we (Washington State) were to have potential clients sign a form saying they do not discriminate against... (the usual list which included "homosexuality"). When a local church board asked me to help facilitate some problem solving, I gave their representative the form knowing the church was anti-gay. The group made the decision not to sign the form and I did not do the work. I believe that I did the right thing and still would not work with a group that discriminates against our protected classes.

Date: 6/28/2002

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