

A NCMI White Paper



17001 Prairie Star Parkway
Suite 100
Lenexa, KS 66220

Where is Faith in Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs)?

By Tom Nees



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FBOs in the United States are civic humanitarian groups loosely associated with a religious tradition or church.

They have received heightened attention since President George W. Bush created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives renamed by President Obama as the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

The White House Office and its counterpart in various Departments were established to ensure that FBOs could compete with secular nonprofit organizations for grants from US Government agencies.

In recent years, the international funding community has now fully engaged Faith-based Organizations as an important vehicle for delivering critical services. Organizations like the United Nations, The European Union and the World Health Organization now actively identify and encourage FBOs to apply for funding

FBOs are precluded from using government funds for religious activities including worship, prayer, religious educations, evangelism and church development. In addition FBOs must not discriminate in who is served by government-funded programs.

In the US most FBOs are incorporated nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations. In other world areas NGOs provide a similar non-governmental organizational structures for faith-based humanitarian organizations.

Some FBOs are religious (sometimes referred to as para-church) organizations with a stated mission for evangelization and church development rather than humanitarian work, i.e., Campus Crusade for Christ. As such they are not eligible nor would they want to receive government funding.

Closely related are FBOs, although not para-church organizations, that engage in humanitarian projects as a means of evangelism, i.e., rescue missions where homeless people must agree to attend worship before receiving food and shelter.

Their humanitarian work is inextricably intertwined with evangelism and/or church development

Most FBOs are organized by church agencies or a group within a faith tradition to advance humanitarian projects, but not to engage directly in church development. World Vision and Compassion International are two of the largest of these.

For others like Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, Inc., sponsored by the Church of the Nazarene as a support agency, evangelism and church development are carried out by their partner church agencies.

These FBOs usually appeal for and use a broad base of financial support including government grants to fund their projects.

For some FBOs the service itself is an expression of faith. The connection to a faith tradition or church agency is passive.

Others require a faith commitment, perhaps even a denominational commitment, by the board, staff and volunteers. Board members may be elected by a church agency and staff members must be from within a faith tradition.

There are no guidelines for determining how FBOs are to embody their faith traditions. For some FBOs the faith dimension is in name only with little or no attempt to identify any religious motivation or expression in their activities. For others, however unstated or understated their faith it is in their culture and nurtured by the board and staff. Other FBOs, such as NCMI, the faith dimension is clearly stated in the bylaws, core values, activities in support of church-sponsored humanitarian projects and the tag “challenged by faith to end poverty.”

Because FBOs choose to identify themselves by faith, it is essential that they intentionally and continually consider how they express that faith and integrate a faith ethos within their organization and programs, being ever mindful of the Biblical mandate of I Peter 3:15. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”

See the White Paper on Connection and Control for information on the relationship of FBOs to church agencies.