

IN GOOD FAITH: TEACHING NOTES

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Case Summary

Brandon Dicorte, LMSW, joined Food for All as the agency's first Development Director. Food for All was a faith-based, non-profit organization that trained interns in and educated the local community about sustainable agricultural development. Louis Touissant, an intern from Haiti, came to Food for All for a one-year internship program. Before his internship ended, Louis left Food for All, but he didn't return to Haiti; he disappeared into the U.S., violating the conditions of his visa. When Brandon and Food for All's Board of Directors learned that Louis hadn't returned home they were confronted with the decision of whether or not to report Louis to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). They also had to consider how Louis' visa violation might affect the agency's reputation, fund-raising efforts, and ability to secure visas for future international interns, as well as what measures they could take to reduce the likelihood of this event ever happening again.

Educational Level And Courses For Which The Case May Be Used

This case was written for upper-class undergraduate and graduate social work students in macro-practice courses, particularly courses in generalist social work practice, social work practice with communities and organizations, and agency administration and planning. It may also be used for specialized courses on international social work, international relief and development, community development, and practice with faith-based, non-profit organizations.

Learning Objectives

Depending upon the focus of the course and the particular case discussion, students may learn:

1. The generalist practice roles that typically characterize a social worker's practice in small, non-profit agencies.
2. The role and purpose of an agency's board of directors and the relationship between an agency's board and administrative staff.
3. The prevalence of dual relationships in small, faith-based organizations, and their positive and negative consequences.
4. A model of international development, and the particular strengths and limitations of this model.
5. To identify ethical values and obligations, and how to adjudicate between competing ethical values and obligations in ethical-decision making.

Discussion Questions and Answers

Facts

1. What do we know about Food for All? What is FFA's model of international development? What is FFA's governance structure?

Food for All (FFA) is a faith-based, non-profit organization of Christian volunteers and professionals committed to the alleviation of world hunger. The organization, which is located near Alexandria, Louisiana, was founded in 1974 by agricultural missionaries from the Mennonite, American Baptist, and United Methodist traditions.

FFA's model of development incorporates three components: (1) training, (2) education, and (3) on-site assistance in three inter-related areas: (1) sustainable agricultural development, (2) appropriate technologies for resource-poor communities in developing countries, and (3) conservation practices. Training interns in sustainable agriculture is the centerpiece of FFA's work. FFA recruits domestic interns for a 15-month internship program that includes a three-month on-site agricultural development component in Central America. After completing the 15-month program, domestic interns begin assignments with humanitarian or faith-based international development agencies. The internship program for international interns is only 12 months. Candidates must complete a lengthy application process and are only considered if they possess adequate English language skills and have sufficiently strong family connections, i.e. a spouse and/or children, at home. After completing the 12-month internship, international interns return home and disseminate the knowledge and skills they acquired at FFA.

FFA is governed by a Board of Directors that receives staff reports from the Executive and Development Directors, sets agency policy, and oversees the organization's operations through four standing committees. The committees include the Executive Committee, Program Committee, Fundraising and Development Committee, and Public Relations Committee. FFA's Board is unique in that nearly all of the members routinely visit FFA and regularly volunteer their time and skills. This gives board members a well-informed picture of the agency's operations and it also cultivates a strong relationship between the Board, staff, interns, and volunteers.

The Executive Director, Pete Langen, runs FFA's daily operations, including managing the farm, training interns, and conducting community education programs. As Executive Director, Pete reports to the Board of Directors and supervises all agency staff, volunteers, and interns.

As Development Director, Brandon Dicortes supervises office staff and reports directly to Pete. He also reports to the Board of Directors on matters of finance, development, and public relations.

2. What do we know about Louis and his relationships with FFA and their staff?

Louis is an educated man from rural Haiti. He is in his early forties. He is single and has no children, although he has several siblings. Physically, his six-foot tall and stocky frame is rather

imposing, but he possesses a deferential, gracious personality. Louis studied agroforestry at Port-au-Prince's Agricultural Polytechnic Institute and has had a working relationship with FFA since FFA began working in Jacmel in 1981. He used his education at the Agricultural Polytechnic Institute to teach basic agroforestry skills and education, first with FFA and then later, beginning in 1987, for his brother, Blaise, who started Food for All, Haiti (FAH), a sister-agency to FFA. Louis was well known to FFA staff and volunteers and he often expressed an interest in interning at FFA for additional education and training in agricultural development.

After earning passing grades in several English courses, Louis was accepted by FFA as an intern. Unfortunately, his success in the classroom didn't translate into an adequate level of language proficiency in Louisiana. A number of factors strained Louis' relationship with FFA personnel. He had language difficulties; he didn't adjust well to the cool fall and cold winter weather; and he refused to share in domestic chores at the farm or dormitory. His relationship with the staff was strained further when he began expressing the desire to leave FFA for CIRAD, another agricultural development organization that was located in southern Florida. Despite several conversations with Pete Langen, Louis left FFA.

3. What is Brandon's professional training and experience? What is his role at FFA?

Brandon earned a master of social work degree with a concentration in healthcare from Tulane University's School of Social Work. After graduation he landed a job in pediatric oncology at Tulane University Hospital and Clinic. He worked as a clinician with children and families for three years before moving back to Alexandria, LA. In Alexandria he was hired as a social work supervisor at St. Mary's Children's Home. He spent ten years at St. Mary's, gradually moving from a social work supervisor into upper administration until he was one of St. Mary's senior administrators.

Brandon was recruited by FFA to serve as their first Development Director. In this capacity he uses the administrative skills he honed at St. Mary's. The focus of Brandon's work at FFA centers on fundraising and development. As Development Director he works closely with the Board of Directors. He submits regular development and finance reports to the board and serves on two standing committees, Fundraising and Development, and Public Relations. Because of his professional credentials and extensive administrative experience, he is highly regarded by the staff and board.

Analysis

4. What dual relationships exist between FFA's staff and board? What are some potential dilemmas these dual relationships pose?

As with many small, faith-based agencies, a prevalence of dual relationships exists at FFA. The most notable cluster of dual relationships is that Pete, Brandon, and a couple of the board members worship together in a small congregation. These dual relationships may foster a deep sense of solidarity with and commitment to FFA. Any disagreements at FFA, however, may spill over into their church fellowship or vice-versa. Also, if the other board members begin to

interpret this group as regularly “speaking with one voice” during board meetings, this may threaten the board’s working relationship and become seriously divisive.

5. Brandon is the first professional with an advanced degree and extensive administrative experience to join FFA. How do Pete and the board regard him?

Brandon’s education and experience bring a greater degree of professionalism to FFA. The decision to recruit him reflects the agency’s awareness of its organizational growth and emerging need for more specialized and diverse staff. As the dialogue reveals, Brandon judiciously offers comments that summarize previous statements, that reframe the discussion, and that keep the conversation from ‘overheating’ or bogging down on certain points. Since no one takes issue with his remarks, the group appears to invest a great deal of respect in him and even a certain degree of authority. Certainly, Angela, the Board President, suggests this when she asks Brandon what he thinks they should do.

6. What generalist social work roles characterize Brandon’s work with Food for All? Does Brandon’s work qualify as social work? Why or why not?

Finding a licensed social worker in an organization like FFA may strike many as peculiar. Two social work roles that stand out are the social worker as administrator and the social worker as social change agent. Social workers with advanced degrees and certain levels of practice experience often move into administrative positions with social service agencies. In these capacities the organization becomes their primary client or client-system. Administrative social work involves a wide-range of skills and functions, including organizational assessment and management; working with a board of directors; reviewing, assessing, and developing agency policies and programs; staff development; fundraising; and inter-agency collaboration. Besides being involved in these functions, Brandon, in representing FFA to the local community through his responsibilities in public relations, is fulfilling the role of the social change agent. He educates the local community about issues of hunger, poverty, and the environment, and he points out the intimate connections between these issues. Through community education and awareness-raising, Brandon works toward positive social, economic, and environmental change in local and international communities.

7. What is Brandon’s decision-making role in this case? Who are the other key decision-makers? How does Brandon’s decision relate to their decisions? In other words, what authority or influence does Brandon have in this situation?

At the institutional level, responding to Louis’ disappearance isn’t Brandon’s decision to make. Although the Board President solicits his input, the decision ultimately rests with the Board of Directors. Pete is obviously another key player in this decision, however, as with Brandon, his role is also restricted to making a recommendation to the Board. The Board of Directors, as FFA’s governing body, is the final decision-maker. And yet Brandon, and Pete, can significantly impact the Board’s decision depending on how they assess the situation and the rationale they provide for a particular course of action. Their potential impact on the board’s decision, therefore, should not be minimized.

8. What differences of opinion are present among the Board? What concerns motivate these differences?

Several board members are quite concerned, and perhaps justifiably so, about how Louis' departure from FFA will impact the agency. Although the Board understands they are not required to report Louis' apparent visa violation, they are clearly split on how to respond to this event. A few board members, particularly Allison and Brenda, believe the best course of action is to report Louis; others, including Catherine and Percy, along with Pete, are resolved against reporting him; the remaining members, and Brandon, appear undecided.

Allison and Brenda express concern for protecting the agency and its reputation, and for ensuring that its work doesn't suffer any damaging consequences if the general public, their supporters and donors, or INS learns that FFA cannot account for Louis' whereabouts.

Despite their disappointment, Catherine, Percy, and Pete believe they owe a greater responsibility to understanding and respecting Louis' decision. For them, especially as Pete and Catherine express it, this has less to do with suffering possible consequences for not reporting him and more to do with following numerous biblical injunctions regarding seeking the welfare of "the stranger in your land."

9. What does it mean for FFA to act "in good faith"? To whom is the board or agency accountable?

The notion of acting "in good faith" is layered with meaning. The board needs to think through what this means with regard to various subjects—the agency itself; their base of volunteers, supporters, and donors; other interns; the U.S. government and federal agencies; God and their religious convictions; Blaise, Food for All, Haiti, and the community of Petite Jacmel; and, of course, Louis.

The board and staff may have different perspectives on what acting "in good faith" means in relation to these subjects. For example, the board, although feeling some degree of sympathy for Louis, may conclude that taking a stronger position, perhaps even to the extent of notifying INS, is in the agency's best interests in terms of credibility, its future ability to secure visas for international interns, and continuing to fulfill its mission. The staff, on the other hand, because they knew Louis more intimately, could conceivably opt for protecting him, proposing a variety of program and policy changes, and risking the possibility of suffering undesirable consequences from outside parties who might disagree with their decision.

10. How might Louis' apparent visa violation hurt the agency? What difference would it make if the board decided to report Louis to INS? What if they decided not to report him but took other actions to prevent this from happening again?

Louis' unwillingness to complete the internship program and his failure to return to Haiti has raised the concerns of FFA's staff and board. We can speculate that other FFA interns, volunteers, and staff share this disappointment. This chain of events is a definite setback for FFA's work with FAH. Louis' decision has deprived FAH of a rare and valuable resource—one

of its most educated and experienced staff. The loss this represents to FAH and Jacmel cannot be understated. It also raises important issues about how this event will affect the working relationship between FFA and FAH, and how it may influence the attitudes of Jacmels' residents toward both agencies.

Louis' action may entice other international interns to risk violating their visa in order to stay in the U.S. rather than return home. This would have drastic consequences for FFA. The challenge for FFA is to respond to this crisis in a way that neither seems to condone or encourage international interns to illegally immigrate nor that alienates international interns by appearing overly harsh, restrictive, or punitive.

Reaction from FFA's supporters and donors is likely to be as diverse as, if not more so than, the board's reaction. Because this is the first incident of its kind, most supporters and donors aren't likely to withdraw their support from FFA. They will, however, want to know what the agency did in response to this incident and how the agency plans to respond if it occurs again.

Although INS doesn't appear to be able to hold FFA legally responsible for Louis' departure or for not reporting it, it is certainly possible that FFA may have added difficulty securing visas for future international interns.

FFA faces a difficult decision and perhaps difficult days ahead as they deal with the unfolding consequences of Louis' departure and apparent visa violation. But it also needs to be recognized that this incident represents a unique opportunity for FFA to gain credibility and enhance their work. This will rest, however, upon the board's decision and its implementation, and how FFA's constituents interpret the agency's responsiveness.

11. What differences, if any, does it make that this event happened after September 11, 2001?

The September 11th terrorist attacks and the U.S. government's legislative and policy responses, especially toward international visitors on student and work visas, will determine some people's decision about this case. Even though FFA is not required to do so, many may insist on the rightness, or at least the appropriateness, of reporting Louis.

For others, these events will not convince them to report Louis. Many will see him, not as a potential terrorist threat on the loose in the United States, but as someone desperately trying to escape the crushing poverty and despair that so pervasively afflicts Haiti. In fact, some people may be compelled not to report Louis because of the severe treatment and civil rights violations of many people, among them U.S. citizens, legal and illegal immigrants, and asylum seekers, detained in the wake of September 11th.

Intervention

12. How do you think Brandon will answer Angela's question? If you were Brandon, what would you say?

Throughout the board meeting Brandon used a variety of active listening and conflict management skills to manage the intensity of the conversation. It is unlikely he will make a suggestion that would alienate up to one-half of the board. Because the responsibility for Louis to honor his visa restrictions and return to Haiti does not lie with Brandon or FFA, Brandon is unlikely to recommend reporting Louis to INS or to anyone else. But considering the seriousness of Louis' premature departure and his apparent disappearance into American society, Brandon will probably want to take some steps to prevent this from happening again.

As students consider what they would do if they were in Brandon's position, encourage them to brainstorm a list of possible recommendations Brandon can make to the board. Also, ask students to consider the potential consequences of each recommendation and how the potential consequences would affect their final decision.

13. Given Brandon's limited decision-making role in this situation, what, if any, responsibility does he have to act if the Board determines a course of action contrary to his recommendation? What might be the basis for his action?

Consider a scenario in which Brandon advises the Board to report Louis yet the Board decides not to do so. Brandon may feel an obligation to act on his reasoned conviction and therefore take it upon himself to contact INS out of professional ethics or biblical values. For example, as a social worker he may regard FFA as the client system to whom he owes the greatest responsibility and thus arrive at the conclusion that it is in FFA's best interest to contact INS and be as forthcoming with Louis' disappearance as possible. He may also feel a responsibility, based on certain passages in the Bible, to see that state laws are upheld and respected. Acting contrary to the Board, however, may seriously jeopardize his job, the consequences of which are also crucial for him to consider.

14. What policy or actions, if any, should the board adopt regarding international interns who leave before their internship concludes or who refuse to return home? How might the agency prevent this from happening again?

FFA has an excellent track record of successfully training international interns. Contrary to some of the fears expressed by Jesse, it is highly doubtful that FFA is in danger of becoming "a wormhole for illegal immigration." This event, however, does suggest the need to evaluate and consider possible changes to FFA's international internship program and related policies. Areas for special consideration include improving the application and screening process, being more attentive to international interns' experience of U.S. culture, and considering policies which specifically address FFA's responsibility and outline action steps in the event an international intern does not complete the program or violates their visa during or after the program.

Teaching Suggestions

This case takes place in an agency that may strike some readers as an atypical setting for social work practice. "What is a social worker doing in an organization like Food for All? And just what is the relationship between social work and sustainable agricultural development?" To help

students reflect on these and similar questions provide students with some of the additional resources on sustainable development listed below, particularly the NASW statement on “Environmental Policy.” Encourage students to discuss these questions in light of these resources.

Additional Resources

Print

To learn more about sustainable development consult:

World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our common future*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

National Association of Social Workers. (2000). *Social work speaks: National Association of Social Workers policy statements 2000-2003*. Washington, DC: National Association of Social Work Press. [Note: See “Environmental Policy”]

Internet

To learn more about Haiti visit:

CIA World Factbook 2002. Available at:

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ha.html>

Pan American Health Organization *Country Profiles*: Haiti. Available at:

http://www.paho.org/English/DD/AIS/be_v24n1-haiti.htm

USAID (United States Agency for International Development)/Haiti. Available at:

<http://www.usaid.gov/ht/>

To learn more about sustainable development visit:

United Nations Division for Sustainable Development. Available at:

<http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/>