

SOCIAL WORK & CHRISTIANITY

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Michael E. Sherr and Robin K. Rogers, Guest Editors

Administrative Practices in Religious Organizations:
Describing Fundamental Practices

ARTICLES

A National Study of Administrative Practices in Religious Organizations

Blessed are the Peacemakers: How Assets and Skills Intrinsic to
Professional Social Work are Informing International RAOs
and the Work of Inter-communal Reconciliation

Developing Community Partnerships With Religiously
Affiliated Organizations to Address Aging Needs:
A Case Study of the Congregational Social Work Education Initiative

The Emergent Journey of Church-Based Program Planning

Exploring the Role of Research in Evangelical Service
Organizations: Lessons from a University/Agency Partnership

PRACTICE NOTE

Developing Programs that Integrate Faith and Practice

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Social Work and Christianity (SWC) is a refereed journal published by the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) to support and encourage the growth of social workers in the ethical integration of Christian faith and professional practice. SWC welcomes articles, shorter contributions, book reviews, and letters which deal with issues related to the integration of faith and professional social work practice and other professional concerns which have relevance to Christianity.

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Administrative Practices in Religious Organizations: Describing Fundamental Practices

Michael E. Sherr & Robin K. Rogers, Guest Editors

TWO YEARS AGO, IN THE MIDST OF OUR WORK ON SEVERAL RESEARCH projects involving religious organizations, the impetus for this special issue emerged to fill a glaring void in the literature on religion and social work practice. Although there has been increasing attention within the social work literature on religion and spirituality, most of the work has been on direct practice with clients. Up to this point, social work scholars have devoted little attention to administrative practices in the context of religious organizations. The minimal literature that does exist focuses too exclusively on evaluating the role of religious organizations in delivering services and evaluating the effectiveness of those services. Evaluation is an undeniably important administrative practice in any setting. We posit, however, that the emphasis on evaluation is premature without answering two related questions: 1) What are the administrative practices in religious organizations; and 2) What skills and assets do social workers bring to administrative leadership and management practices in religious organizations?

The six articles in this issue provide a starting place for addressing the two questions. The first article provides a centerpiece by reporting findings from a national study describing the administrative practices of religious organizations that operate social service programs. Following the lead article, four other pieces highlight diverse social work skills and values used in administrative roles in religious organizations. The

articles include examples of social work initiation and collaboration skills, rational and emergent strategic planning skills, trust building and empathetic communication skills, networking skills, and valuing the skill of practicing with cultural competence. Then, in a practice note, a social work administrator with the Salvation Army, shares his 20 years of expertise cultivating an agency environment that promotes faith integration.

Readers will find that the distinctively Christian context, in its many diverse forms, is a common theme permeating throughout the special issue. As in other religious traditions, the unique context of each religious organization imbues every aspect of knowledge, values, and skills used in practice. From our experience as practitioners, educators, and researchers, we have learned that the context of religious organizations is almost never neutral, usually does not corrupt, but does require a professional stance of starting where the client is, in this case, the organization as client.

Our hope is that readers can identify tangible administrative practices and the potential for diverse application of social work skills and values in the administration of religious organizations. We also encourage readers to appreciate the unique context of working with religious organizations prior to, or as a part of, evaluating their programs and services. ❖

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A National Study of Administrative Practices in Religious Organizations

Gaynor Yancey, Robin K. Rogers, Jon Singletary, and Michael Sherr

This study examined the administrative practices of a national random sample of 773 religious organizations. Results indicated consistent use of some administrative practices such as policies/procedures (bylaws, mission statements, and finance policies) and sporadic use of other administrative practices such as fundraising, staff training, record keeping, and evaluation. Social workers are encouraged to understand administrative practices, examine how they contribute to the culture of organizations, and influence the role of evaluation when seeking to collaborate with religious organizations.

IN THE LAST DECADE, THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN developing and delivering social services has gained considerable attention in social work research. As a case in point, the number of publications with the terms “spirituality” or “religion” in the titles has tripled since 1996 (*Social Work Abstracts*, 2006). Despite the increase, social work research on religious organizations is a nascent area of study in need of methodical description before making inferences about effectiveness, best practices, and optimal levels of participation in social service delivery. This is especially the case for administrative practices as a void of articles in this area is evident of the limited knowledge base available to guide social work practice with religious organizations. The purpose of the current study is to serve as a primer on administrative practices and to provide an empirical foundation for future research and practice with religious organizations.

Defining Religious Organizations and Administrative Practices

Based on the work of Sheridan and Bullis (1991), we refer to religion within the broad context of spirituality, meaning a person's search for, as well as his or her expression or experience of that which is ultimately meaningful. A broad view of religion allows for an appreciation of the many spiritual practices traditionally developed within the context of a religion, while recognizing that many contemporary spiritualities are practiced outside the confines of a specific religion. For our purposes, we understand religious organizations to be a specific category of volunteer associations (Sherr, 2008) where individuals and communities engage in broad and diverse spiritual and sacerdotal practices.

Religious organizations range in size and scope. From a systems perspective, Cnaan, Wineburg, and Boddie (1999) provide a typology of six types of religious organizations based on organizational complexity. They include:

1. **Local Congregations:** "a group of people that has a shared identity, meets regularly on an ongoing basis, comes together primarily for worship and has location of a living or working space, has an identified religious leader, and has an official name and some formal structure that conveys its purpose and identity " (pp. 9-10).
2. **Interfaith agencies and ecumenical coalitions:** "organizations, local congregations from different religions, and denominations join together for purposes of community solidarity, social action, and/or providing large-scale services that are beyond the scope of a single congregation" (p. 32).
3. **Citywide or regionwide sectarian agencies:** "the one most often identified with religious-based social service delivery....Sectarian agencies often employ social workers as service providers and managers and serve as a placement site for social work students " (pp. 33-34).
4. **National projects and organizations under religious auspices:** "have multiple affiliates or chapters throughout the nation and even the world [and] have become a major force in provision of services to communities " (p. 36).
5. **Paradenominational advocacy and relief organizations:** "serve or advocate for people in need and are concerned with

improving educational opportunities for people...although the organizations are not officially affiliated with any religion or denomination, they are based on religious principles and have strong theological undertones in their mission statements. Their goal is to improve the social condition by applying religious principles to a secular world “ (p. 41).

6. Religiously affiliated international organizations: “the emphasis of today’s religiously affiliated organizations is to bring relief and aid to underserved people of the world’s poorest nations. In many countries...they are defined as and operate as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); in other countries they take the form of missionary agencies“ (p. 43).

We refer to administrative practices as a broad range of practices that support the design and delivery of human services. Such practices can include (but are not limited to) leadership development, fundraising, fiduciary management, supervision, staff management, recruitment and retention, volunteer management, proposal writing, strategic planning, communication with external stakeholders, program development, board development, and management and evaluation. Moreover, we view the role of administrative practices in religious organizations in the context of generalist practice where interventions are directed at enhancing individual well-being, creating positive community conditions conducive to enhancing well-being, and empowering individuals and small systems to be civically engaged and influence the larger systems affecting people’s lives (Meenaghan, Gibbons, & McNutt, 2005).

Social Work Literature on Religious Organizations

Social work literature provides minimal information to guide practitioners on working or collaborating with religious organizations. Until recently, only a handful of social work scholars viewed religious organizations as a practice setting worthy of serious inquiry. For instance, Coughlin’s (1965) seminal study reported that government resources were contributing to as much as 80% of the budgets of religious organizations providing services. He cautioned that some religious organizations were becoming increasingly dependent upon public funds. During the 1980s, in the aftermath of the federal cuts for human services and President Reagan urging religious organizations to

help compensate for cutbacks, Salamon and Teitelbaum (1984) offered another look into the involvement of religious organizations. In brief, they asserted that despite finding large amounts of service activities, in terms of compensating for cutbacks, the absolute impact was quite limited. Netting's research during the same time period focused on the meaning of religion in religious organizations and the impact of the relationship between a religious human service organization and other religious organizations, such as a denominational entity or a similar auspice organization. Theology, staff selection, values, administration and leadership, and service programming are all themes that are relevant in understanding the role of religion in an organization (Netting, 1984).

Shortly thereafter, Wineburg and colleagues put forth a number of studies on religious organizations' contributions to volunteerism in communities (Wineburg & Wineburg, 1986; Wineburg, 1994, 1996, 2001; Wineburg, Ahmed, & Sills, 1997). More recently, a proliferation of books and articles has examined the role of religious organizations from a number of perspectives including, feminist theology (Tangenberg, 2003, 2005), working with HIV/AIDS (Chambre, 2001), substance abuse (Hodge & Pittman, 2003), the Salvation Army (Lewis, 2003), and the specific role of congregations (Billingsley, 2001; Cnaan, 2002; Cnaan, Sinha, & McGrew, 2004).

In most of the examples above, we posit that scholars focused too soon and too much on examining deductive questions that attempted to evaluate the outputs, outcomes, and consequences of practicing in religious organizations without an understanding of how they function. Social workers need a sound base of observational, qualitative, and descriptive studies that provides the conceptual clarity needed to guide current practice and research that is more advanced. Stated differently, inductive inquiry focused on observing what is there needs to undergird the testing or evaluating of any assumptions about religious organizations (Rodwell & Woody, 1997; Rubin, & Babbie, 2008). At best, rushing to evaluation research too early means that hypotheses are based on anecdotal opinion, and at worst, based on distorted biases without understanding or appreciation for the cultural context of religious organizations. We agree with Thyer's (2007) recent description of research in this area, as being so embryonic that initial designs of what is presently studied and reported is still needed.

Assumptions and Research Question

We based the current study on the following assumptions. There is very little empirical information about how religious organizations function in relation to developing and delivering human services. Current social work research on religious organizations is problematic in that studies prematurely focus on evaluation of outcomes and not enough on understanding the unique contexts of religious organizations as human service providers. Given the nascent interest in examining religious organizations as social service providers, there is a need in the social work literature for inductive and descriptive studies to build a trustworthy foundation of information for future research. These assumptions led us to examine the following research question: What are the administrative practices of religious organizations that operate social service programs?

Methodology

Phase I

The research took place in two phases. In the first phase, 21 people from four universities in different states engaged in in-depth qualitative interviews with key informants in selected human service programs of faith-based organizations in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Texas, and California. Sixty-four transcribed interviews generated from a purposive sample of fifteen organizations having “promising or exemplary programs” in four urban communities were analyzed using the constant comparison method. Characteristics of promising or exemplary programs were adapted from the work of John Orr, a colleague in the project: (1) being highly successful in delivering services at the local level; (2) exemplifying the power of collaboration in working with other faith-based and community agencies, as well as the public sector to address poverty; (3) being innovative in their strategies, materials, and/or collaborative organizational models; or already functioning as elements of a service delivery system in which public and private programs complement each other; and (4) providing models that might be replicable in other similar organizations and/or showing promise of attracting stable financial support (Orr, Mounts, & Spoto, 2001).

Primary analysis included four rounds of coding and resulted in 232 core codes and 6 core networks of themes for our grounded theory. A

second level of analysis resulted in a data set that includes 166 primary documents (interview transcripts), 1300 codes, and 62 networks that reflect the richness of the data. From this analysis, the research team created a set of 307 potential survey questions. The outcome of Phase I was a 95-item questionnaire that asks administrators of religious organizations about six areas of administrative practices including policies/procedures, fundraising, outreach, staff training, recordkeeping, and evaluation.

Phase II

Phase II involved selecting the sample and administering the survey. Cities from each of the 12 Census Bureau regions were selected for sampling and included major metropolitan areas as well as some mid and smaller-sized metropolitan areas, with a focus on obtaining maximum ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. Sample cities chosen were Providence, RI; New York, NY; Pittsburg, PA; Miami, FL; Detroit, MI; Chicago, IL; Tulsa, OK; San Antonio, TX; Denver, CO; Los Angeles, CA; Richmond, VA; and Seattle, WA.

A multi-stage stratified random sample was used to select religious organizations from each city. First, the sampling frame was developed using a number of sources. Sources included the American church list, the National Center for Charitable Statistics, intermediaries, key informants, and Internet searches. The list consisted of 35,727 religious organizations of which 10,883 were selected by a random number generator for inclusion in the final sample. Analysis with SPSS included frequencies and appropriate correlations to describe the administrative practices. Because of space limitations, the findings in this study are limited to the quantitative analysis.

Findings

Demographic Profile of Religious Organizations

Just over 7% (n=773) of the religious organizations completed the survey of which 52.9% (n=409) were congregations and 47.1% (n=364) were from other faith-based organizations (FBOs). We attributed the low response rate to several factors including the requirement that only organizations operating direct social service programs needed

to respond, the length of the survey (9 pages), the detailed questions asked about budgets, policies, and evaluation procedures, a number of religious organizations in the sampling frame with incorrect addresses, and some with names appearing religious but that did not consider themselves to be religious organizations.

Religious Affiliation

The sample represents a proportionate distribution of religious affiliations in the United States (The Pew Forum, 2008). A majority of the sample was affiliated with Protestant (63.5%), Catholic (17.6%), or congregations consisting members with different religious perspectives (10.5%). Other religious affiliations included Jewish (2.8%), Independent (1.6%), and Buddhist/Zen (1.2%). Religious organizations from Muslim, Hindu, Jehovah's Witness, Jesus of Latter Day Saints, and other, each represented less than one percent of the sample.

Ages and Budgets of Organizations

At the time of the survey, most of the religious organizations had been operating for at least three years (see Table 1). Over half of the congregations (50.8%) were at least 50 years old and another fifth (21.9%) were in existence for over 25 years. A majority of FBOs (60.6%) were established between 1976 and 2000. A third of FBOs (34%) were in existence for 50-100 years. A small percentage of FBOs (5.5%) had been operating 1-3 years.

Table 1: Age of Religious Organizations

| Year Established | Approximate Age of Organization | Congregations | FBOs |
|-------------------------|--|----------------------|-------------|
| < 1800 | 200+ Yrs | 1.50% | 0.0% |
| 1801-1900 | 100 - 200 Yrs | 19.0% | 5.5% |
| 1901-1950 | 50 – 100 Yrs | 30.3% | 13.8% |
| 1951-1975 | 25 – 50 Yrs | 21.9% | 14.7% |
| 1976-2000 | 3 – 27 Yrs | 26.0% | 60.6% |
| 2001-2003 | 1 – 3 Yrs | 1.3% | 5.5% |

Congregations and FBOs differ in the distribution of budget size. Congregations spent only 8% of their budgets on social service programs,

whereas FBOs spent over two-thirds of their budgets (70%). Moreover, budget sizes were quite different. A third of (34%) congregations had annual budgets of less than \$6,000 for social service programs. Another 30 percent of congregations had budgets between \$6,000 and \$24,000 for programs. A fifth of congregations had budget over \$100,000 for programs. In contrast, almost half (47%) of FBOs had budgets in excess of \$100,000 per year. In fact, over a quarter (27%) had over \$386,000 annual budgets. Fewer FBOs had budgets between \$6,000 and \$24,000 (12%) and less than \$6,000 (13%), respectively.

Participants Served

One-third of the congregations' programs report having no female participation, while one-third report having as much as 60% female participation. About one-fifth of FBOs report having no female participation, while two-fifths report having as much as 60% female participation. Persons age 17 and younger (<17) were enrolled in 53.8% of congregations' social service programs and 60.2% of FBOs' programs. Similarly, persons aged 25-64 were enrolled in 57.6% of congregations' social service programs and 61.8% of FBOs' programs. Leaders reported that African Americans enrolled in 57.2% of congregations' social service programs, with Whites enrolled in 55.7%. In FBOs, African Americans enrolled in 69.1% of services and Whites in 65.6%. The Hispanic/Latino population enrolled in 43.6% of Congregations' services and in 57.6% of FBOs' services.

Administrative Practices

Descriptive findings are presented for each of the six areas of administrative practices—policies/procedures, fundraising, outreach, staff training, recordkeeping, and evaluation.

Policies/Procedures

We asked leaders of religious organizations to identify policies and procedures they have from a list of 16 options. A large majority of organizations had Bylaws (85.9%, n=664) and Mission Statements (86.7%, n=670), while three fourths (75.7%, n=585) had finance policies. Over half of the religious organizations (55.2%, n=427) have written program objectives. Over 40% of religious organizations provide staff with employee handbooks, have policies for staff orientation, and continual training, while a third have written policies and procedures

that address evaluation, contractual agreements with staff, ethics statements, daily operating procedures, and grievance procedures. A small number of religious organizations (2.7%, n=21) have no written policies or procedures.

Fundraising

Religious organizations raised funds for social services programs in different ways. The most common methods for raising funds were hosting special events (58%, n=448), direct mail campaigns (38.2%, n=295), writing grant proposals (37.8%, n=292), and developing relationships with donors (37.3%, n=287). Thirty percent (n=232) of religious organizations engaged in planned giving programs, and over a quarter (27.4%, n=211) had capital campaigns. Fourteen percent (n=107) had no formal fundraising strategies.

Outreach Strategies

A large majority of religious organizations used informal methods of communicating their services. Almost 90 percent (89.5%, n=692) reported “word-of-mouth “ outreach and almost half (48.8%, n=376) reported individual recruitment for telling the community about the services. Although used less frequently, other methods of outreach included phone book listing (39.2%, n=303), referrals from other agencies (36.1%, n=279), and Internet web page (29.8%, n=230). Only 13% of religious organizations (n=99) were affiliated with a United Way. Five percent (n=139) reported having no outreach strategy.

Staff Training

Staff training received inconsistent attention in religious organizations. Less than half of the staff hired (48.3%, n=370) receive any type of orientation. Only a fifth of the leaders send staff to conferences or workshops, provide formal in-service training, or opportunities to earn continuing education credit. It seems that informal on-the-job training is the most common method of ensuring staff preparation and performance (53.87%, n=412). One in 10 religious organizations (10.1%, n=78) provides no staff training at all.

Record keeping

Leaders of religious organizations report sporadic patterns of record-keeping. Slightly more than 40% of religious organizations keep intake

(42.4%, n=325) or attendance (43.6%, n=337) records. Only a quarter of religious organizations keep records of individual clients such as service plans, progress notes, goal attainment, or follow-up. Over a third of the organizations keep demographic records (37.6%, n=288). Eight percent do not record any information about the people they serve (n=62).

Evaluation

Evaluation procedures at religious organizations tend to be informal and provide minimal data for comparative studies with services delivered by other organizations. Almost a fifth of religious organizations (18.1%, n=140) do not even evaluate their services because they are not required to do so, do not think they are important, or do not have the financial resources to conduct an adequate evaluation. Two-thirds of the organizations rely on positive feedback for evaluation (66.2%, n=507), and over half rely on participant satisfaction (55.1%, n=426). Only a third of religious organizations formally evaluate their services (36.7%, n=281), and only a fifth compare their services with other programs (21.9%, n=168) to determine success. The primary method of evaluation is staff observations (60.0%, n=456) followed by reviewing participant records (34.3%, n=263) and conducting interviews (32.1%, n=246). Only 10% (10.6%, n=81) seek outside consultation for evaluating services. Moreover, a relatively small percentage of religious organizations formally communicate the findings of evaluations through annual reports (30.3%, n=244), brochures (24.3%, n=186), or evaluation reports (21.8%, n=167).

Discussion

This study contributes to the literature on social work in religious organizations because it expands the scope to administrative practices. Furthermore, six areas of administrative practices emerged as important components to examine when seeking to understand the context of practice in a religious organization. Evaluation, though important, provides only one part of the picture, especially in the absence of the other components of administrative practice. Examining policies and procedures, fundraising, outreach, staff training, record keeping, and approaches to evaluation could provide the context for understanding how religious organizations function, how they deliver services, and how to define effectiveness.

Taken together, the findings reveal extensive variability of some administrative practices and patterns of other practices. For instance, although leaders reported a set range of fundraising, staff training, and record keeping activities in qualitative interviews, the survey findings suggest that these three areas receive inconsistent and sporadic attention from religious organizations. In contrast, there is a consistent pattern of policies and procedures and the use of informal outreach strategies. The lack of consistency, however, does not necessarily mean that organizations are ineffective in providing social services. Instead, it may be evidence of the informal nature of delivering services that makes religious organizations unique and appealing in the first place. As Peterson and Hughey (2002) suggest, what is important for social workers is to understand the organizational processes (and not necessarily “fix “ them) and work to create a goodness-of-fit to empower the people served by them. In some situations, that may involve focusing on administrative practices as the target systems. In other situations, that may require accepting the administrative practices as part of the culture of religious organizations, focusing instead on micro-level interventions for persons served by religious organizations.

The findings also offer social workers guidance in evaluating services of religious organizations. Religious organizations are often too different from one another to lump them together for deductive analysis. Instead, the findings suggest tailoring evaluation methods to specific religious organizations. Woolnough (2008), a volunteer for an international religious organization and a retired scholar at Oxford University, posits the use of participatory and developmental evaluation methods that “seek to find out what is going on, to get insights into the processes and values involved, and to emphasize improving, rather than proving, aspects of evaluation “ (pp. 138-139). Based on our experience of evaluating religious organizations, we agree with Woolnough, adding our recommendation of using case studies of religious organizations with multiple forms of data collection procedures.

Limitations of this study relate to the methodology. The exhaustive efforts to develop an adequate sampling frame and sample a large number of religious organizations created an adequate sample size for the descriptive analysis. The 7% response rate for the study, however, was still not sufficient for generalizing the findings beyond the religious organizations completing the survey.

Another study limitation is associated with denominational af-

filiation. Although the sample represents a proportionate distribution of religious affiliations in the United States, the findings appear most relevant for Christian denominations. We suggest including an overrepresentation of other denominations in future research and presenting the data on administrative practices for religious organizations grouped by different denominations.

Finally, social desirability bias is a limitation. Given their positions as leaders of religious organizations and the in-depth nature of the questions, it is plausible to assume that leaders who completed the survey may have either over-inflated or minimized the extent in which they carryout administrative practices. The questions did not provide explicit examples of what constituted a certain threshold in order to indicate the use of an administrative practice. Leaders used their own discretion in deciding what constituted an administrative practice.

Implications for Practice and Research with Religious Organizations

This research has several implications for social work practice with religious organizations. Administrative practices create the foundation and organizational culture for services delivered by religious organizations. The findings suggest that social workers spend time assessing the various aspects of administrative practices as they seek to work with religious organizations. In the same way, the findings suggest that social workers avoid drawing premature conclusions about the effectiveness of religious-based services.

Instead, we encourage social workers to focus on learning and appreciating the values that motivate service delivery and the process of how religious organizations implement their plans to deliver services. As social workers learn about particular religious organizations and communicate appreciation for them, they will have the credibility to collaborate in areas where social work involvement can improve services.

This research also provides social workers with direction as to the types of collaboration that could be useful to religious organizations. While recognizing the limitations, the findings offer initial evidence suggesting that religious organizations could benefit from social workers assisting with staff training, fundraising, and evaluation. In offering to collaborate, however, it is important for social workers to appreciate the context of religious organizations. For instance, a social

worker could collaborate with a grassroots religious organization to help facilitate effective strategies for raising additional funds. As part of that collaboration, the social worker could use facilitation skills to assist the leaders of a religious organization to make informed decisions about seeking funds by federal, state, and local grants or by private foundation. Getting a large grant could increase the number of people a religious organization can serve; however, it could also change the informal administrative practices and lead to the organization's reliance on large gifts in the future. After assessing the situation, the leaders may decide to continue to seek funding by improving their relationships with current donors and creating additional events for development. In this case, the social worker needs to appreciate the desire to remain informal and autonomous.

Social workers can also collaborate with religious organizations on evaluation. On one hand, social workers can practice in the role of educators to explain why evaluation is important, what types of data to collect, how to analyze the data, and how to use the information to improve service delivery. On the other hand, social workers can collaborate with staff to conduct the evaluations. We recommend evaluation studies that focus on in-depth case study designs that use multiple forms of data collection.

Social workers should establish the expectation of evaluation upfront and tailor methods to capture three types of data: 1) The specific administrative practices of a religious organization; 2) the processes of how people's lives changed because of receiving services from religious organizations; and 3) a measure of the expected outcome. Focusing on case study designs does not rule out the use of experimental designs to measure outcomes. When fit, feasibility, and focus are considered, social workers might choose to utilize random assignment, control groups, and multiple waves (at least 3 points in time of data collection) of data collection to measure outcomes.

The main difference in the goal of the findings is to improve the services in religious organizations and not to generalize the findings to all religious organizations. The use of case study findings in refereed journals is important, however, so that social workers can inform their practice and disseminate useful methods at different religious organizations. ❖

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