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*"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"*

## **BUILDING ON THE STORY AND COMPELLING STORIES: KEYS FOR SUCCESSFUL CHURCH-BASED PROGRAMS FOR HOMELESS FAMILIES**

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### **Introduction**

In the spring of 1993, a family practice doctor in a small Wisconsin town found out that one of his patients, a single parent with two young children, had spent the winter living in a camper. While she was working, she did not have the money for a security deposit and first month's rent for an apartment. He set out to see what could be done about this, starting in his church. Almost two years later, Bethel House, a faith-based ecumenical non-profit, housed its first family. By the end of 2007, Bethel House had six housing units, had provided transitional housing and support services to fifty-eight families and provided

financial assistance to dozens more, preventing further homelessness in the area.

Six local churches originally agreed to support Bethel House, and nine churches now participate in the mission. United Way funding accounts for 11% of the \$73,000 budget, with the rest coming from church and church member donations and two annual fund-raisers. Bethel House started with a house and a duplex leased from the large Methodist church in the community, which had bought the properties thinking that they would be torn out for church expansion. In the intervening years, Bethel House has added three more houses.

The setting of Bethel House is Whitewater, a community with six thousand permanent residents within the municipal limits, approximately nine thousand permanent residents in the area served by the school district, and seven to eight thousand students who live in residence halls and rental units in the community.

The success of Bethel House in serving homeless families was the subject of one evaluation completed in 1998 and another that will be finished in 2008. This study does not address this issue, only the organization's continued growth and increasing base of support over time.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative approach was utilized, in order to understand the experiences, understandings, and meaning of participation on the Bethel House board by the board members, rather than the researchers' point of view (Chamberlain, 1999). A goal of the study was to produce findings with credibility and substantive significance. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a

qualitative study is credible when it produces such accurate descriptions or interpretations of human experience that people who share that experience would immediately recognize the description.

This paper is based on a number of sources. The second author conducted in-depth interviews with eighteen present and past board members in Bethel House in the spring of 2007; the average length of the interview was ninety minutes. These interviews were somewhat structured. The authors determined the questions in consultation with the Board President and the coordinator, and one pretest interview was conducted. An additional interview question was added during the process.

There were also multiple interviews with the current Bethel House coordinator, an hour-long group interview with six long-term board members after one of the monthly meetings, and an in-depth discussion by three of the founding board members to clarify the early history of Bethel House. Minutes of the meetings, newsletters, newspaper articles, and other secondary sources were also reviewed.

The first author can be described as a participant-observer, as he was one of the founding members of Bethel House and has served on the board continuously since its formal inception. When the decision was made to move beyond the first two churches involved, he was contacted and invited to the initial meeting of the group that became the Bethel House board, invited both as a representative of his small nondenominational church and also because he had experience and expertise in the area of homeless families.

A qualitative approach was utilized, in order to understand the experiences, understandings, and meaning of participation on the Bethel House board by the board members, rather than the researchers' point of view (Chamberlain, 1999). A goal of the study was to produce findings with credibility and substantive significance. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a qualitative study is credible when it produces such accurate descriptions or interpretations of human experience that people who share that experience would immediately recognize the description.

Especially with large data sets, one can achieve statistical significance in quantitative research without achieving substantive significance. According to Michael Patton (2002), these kinds of questions can determine substantive significance:

1. How solid, coherent, and consistent is the evidence in support of the findings?
2. To what extent and in what ways do the findings increase and deepen understanding of the phenomenon studied?
3. To what degree are the findings consistent with other knowledge? A finding supported by and supportive of other work has confirmatory significance; a finding that breaks new ground has discovery or innovative significance (p. 467).

Consensual validation refers to the agreement as to the substantive significance of findings between a number of persons knowledgeable about the subject (Patton, 2002). A discussion with eight long-term board members on the

preliminary findings yielded agreement that the researchers' findings were accurate.

The interviews were transcribed and then the responses to the questions sorted so that the researchers could analyze them for themes. Coding was originally done by each researcher separately and then the results were compared. From this emerged the themes that are presented in the paper.

A modified grounded theory approach was used in this study. In grounded theory, the theory is derived from the data, not the other way around. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), with grounded theory one explains a phenomenon by identifying the key elements of that phenomenon, and then describing the relationships of these elements both to each other and to the specific. Other writings and theory are utilized in the explanation of the findings.

## **Results and Discussion**

The following themes emerged as important in understanding Bethel House's continued existence and growth: the role of The Story and stories, congregations and connections, six decisions that shaped the mission and program, and intersecting and mutually reinforcing identity formation.

### The role of The Story and stories

We can be seen as "homo fabula," humans as storytellers. Through stories, we communicate and experience life every day of our lives (Schank, 1990). Three ways in which story has been important to Bethel House are the stories of the first three families associated through Bethel House, the stories of

Bethel House participants communicated through newsletters, and most importantly, the stories that Jesus told during his time on earth.

The first story was of a woman living in a camper with her children. It is interesting to note that though there was not a question addressing this origin of Bethel House, while conducting the interviews, the interviewer noticed a trend in many board members pausing and saying something along the lines of “Well, do you know how Bethel House began? It all started with Dr. Ken Kidd. He had a patient one day with two sick children who he found out were living in a camper by the lake...” As one of the other founding board members, an attorney who has conducted all of the negotiations stated, “When Ken told me that story of the family with the camper, I thought, ‘This is Whitewater!’ I use that story all the time. I used it to negotiate the last five year lease, because many of the members on the Methodist Church governing board were not around when we started.”

The first family that Bethel House served was a couple in their early thirties with young children. Both parents were working, but when the wife developed heart problems that necessitated a heart transplant, they were not able to keep up with bills. The parents of the husband were active in the Methodist church that was in the process of leasing the buildings, and Bethel House’s early reputation was enhanced by their helping a deserving family connected to that Methodist church.

The second family housed was a single-parent family, a woman with four children who was separated from her husband, living over a garage. There were fumes coming up from the garage, with a danger of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Much of the early resistance to supporting Bethel House within the congregations were from individuals whose image of homelessness was an older man drinking from a bottle in a long paper bag or a woman with multiple layers of clothing, pushing a shopping cart with all her belongings and muttering in unintelligible words. One does not see such cases of chronic homelessness in Whitewater. However, these three stories resonated as the kind of misfortune that could easily happen to families.

In 1998, the third Bethel House coordinator initiated the publication of a newsletter, to be published four times a year and distributed through the bulletins of the participating churches. As a way of both preserving client confidentiality and also sharing stories that make the work of Bethel House understandable to middle-class churchgoers with no direct experience of homelessness, participants' own stories are shared when they are volunteered. Below are two examples from past newsletters:

*My family's been through a lot. I never thought we would wind up with no place to live. I mean, sure, when we were evicted, we had family in another state we could maybe have moved in with, but that would have put them in a bad situation and they were all just getting by, too. We really had no place to go, except for Bethel House.*

*I have always worked hard for everything I have, all my life. But it's been tough, ya know. My wife and me didn't finish high school. We were young and in love, and felt ready to take on the real world, like our parents did. We both worked hard and started our family, three kids. Life was good until a few years back, I started with my health problems. My doctor says I'm lucky to be alive after having a series of severe heart attacks.*

*It's really hard on a guy to go from feeling like I can do everything, to feeling completely helpless. I was unable to work and totally dependent on my wife who had to support our family. But her minimum-wage job wasn't enough to keep us going. Family helped when they could, but it didn't take long for us to rack up bills we had no way of paying. We had really nice landlords, but eventually we got so far behind that they had to evict us.*

*Within days of meeting with the coordinator, we were in a nice little house, with furniture that replaced some of the stuff we had picked up over the years. It wasn't just the house. Bethel House gave us the chance to turn things around. We were at Bethel House for about a year and half. We worked with a financial counselor and then they gave us a lawyer that helped us file for bankruptcy. We really had no other choice, we were so bad off.*

*The Coordinator worked out a budget and pay schedule for the bills we couldn't cover under the bankruptcy. It was really important to us that we pay back our old landlord, and the payment plan allowed us to do that. We paid back every penny of back rent. That felt really good.*

*Just when we were starting to make progress, our car completely died. We were devastated because we needed a car for all my doctor's appointments and trips to the hospital. Bethel House, again, came through. We are still driving the car that some generous family donated.*

*Our stay at Bethel House also gave my family time to heal. We had been through a lot and were emotionally "wrecked". It was good for us to get some help from the therapist that they provided.*

*I still can't work, but am now receiving disability benefits (the process took almost three years!) and my wife has a steady job. We are in our own place and are doing great.*

*When your whole world collapses around you, you just don't know how good it feels knowing there are people out there, people I'll never even meet, who were behind us and support this place, for families like mine".*

*"I never imagined I would become homeless. I grew up in a middle class family and though I have an anxiety disorder that prevents me from working outside the home, my husband had always been able to support us. We had just purchased our dream home and I was happy in my roles as home-maker and mother. Then our whole world came crashing down.*

*We made some poor financial decisions and got in over our heads with the expenses of the new house. We were facing foreclosure. At the same time, my husband was diagnosed with cancer and became unable to work. This was such a terrifying and stressful time for us.*

*I truly don't know what we would have done had it not been for the safe- haven of Bethel House.*

*We did lose our home, but by coming to Bethel House we were able to move back to the support of family and have a safe place to stay.*

*Bethel House provided a lawyer that helped us file for bankruptcy, something I never imagined having to go through. We thought we would only be at Bethel House until my husband's worker's disability came through and we'd be able to support ourselves, but his health deteriorated so quickly that we stayed some additional time so that he wouldn't have to be moved.*

*It gave my husband so much peace in his final months knowing that our financial problems had been resolved and that his family was going to be cared for.*

*Bless all of you at Bethel House for the work you do and for caring for my family when we needed it most."*



The coordinator stated that the newsletters helped to convey the impression that Bethel House was an organization doing good work. After the publication of the newsletters, which contained stories from participants, she stated that people were more receptive when called to volunteer or help Bethel House in some way.

Board members were asked how important to them was it that Bethel House was a Christian organization, and how their board participation related to their Christian faith. Here are excerpts from the replies of eight of the eighteen board members interviewed:

- Caring for those less fortunate than us is the most basic thing Jesus said to do.
- I really feel God's hand working when I work with families and that has strengthened my faith. I feel closer to God when I'm helping them.
- The Christian mission of helping people when they are down and out, is a good one.
- Christianity, you have to have good works and faith. I'm a little shaky on the faith part. But if you're gonna be Christian, you gotta be involved in good works. You're supposed to walk the walk.
- It is my faith. I have great faith in God and in Jesus Christ. I couldn't do it if I didn't have faith. It's the way I live my faith. I believe that the Lord is there with me as I do it.
- The work that we do is an expression of our faith. That's what I thought Christianity is all about. "Do unto others."
- The foundations of the Christian faith is the teaching of Christian to do unto other as you'd have them do to you. And to do it without judgment.
- Direct relationship, in Christian teachings, this is a part of what a Christian should do.

Also present in the responses was the sense that being active in Bethel House was not only important to the individuals living out their faith but also for their churches, the board members acting as representatives of their churches:

- I see it as a way to fulfill the second part of the Great commandment. "Love thy neighbor as thyself." A great way for the church to do it also.

- The fact that it's a Christian organization shows the fact that the church is providing more than a place of worship,
- Jesus didn't tell us to go build fancy churches. He told us to care for the poor.
- The fact that it's a Christian organization shows the fact that the church is providing more than a place of worship

The board members were conveying that this is not only important to them personally, but also important that their churches be involved in this caring ministry. The present coordinator, a member of the one of the churches since before Bethel House's inception, talked of "People having the sense that this is what we need to be doing as Christians, but our churches aren't doing it."

As part of the Lilly Foundation funded "Congregations in Changing Communities" project, researcher Nancy Ammerman collected survey responses from 1,995 individuals in twenty-three congregations. People were asked how important various practices were in "living the Christian life" as well as what the top priorities of their churches should be. From these responses, Dr. Ammerman was able to group the churchgoers into three categories:

- *Golden Rule Christians* (51% of the total)—"the most important attributes of a Christian are caring for the needy and living one's Christian values every day. The most important task of the church, they say, is service to people in need" (1997a, p. 198).
- *Evangelicals* (29% of the total)—"emphasize prayer, Bible study, and witnessing as key Christian practices and, correspondingly, want their churches to give attention to evangelism and helping them resist the temptations of this world, while preparing for the world to come" (1997a, p. 198).
- *Activists* (19% of the total)—"emphasize social action and working for justice" (1997a, p. 198).

According to Ammerman, the good life for which Golden Rule Christians aim is focused on doing good deeds and looking for opportunities to provide care and comfort for those in need (1997a). While Golden Rule Christianity may be

the dominant form of lived religion in the middle-class suburban Americans in that study, it is likely to also be paramount in the mainstream congregations (Catholic, Methodist, Congregational, and ELCA Lutheran) in the small town of Whitewater, and certainly apparent in the church members' responses quoted above. Neither activism nor active evangelicalism are characteristics of those churches.

The stories told to church-goers, often from childhood Sunday school, shape our understanding of what it means to not only be a person of faith but also how to "be in the world but not of the world" (Matthew 5:16). Perhaps the story that best typifies Golden Rule Christians is the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30—37). The sociologist Robert Wuthnow states this story can be seen as one of the ancient myths that embody the deepest meanings in our culture. In a study he conducted, seven in ten churchgoers could recount the Good Samaritan story, and those who could were twice as likely to be involved in charitable activities as those who could not. Wuthnow states that it is impossible to know whether knowing the story came before or after the good works, but it is likely that knowing the story came first, as so many people mention learning it in childhood (1991).

The importance of helping others as part of one's Christian identity is illustrated in a quote from one of Bethel House's founding members, co-owner with his brother of a farm implement dealership, "All of our life, growing up, we were told that this was what Christians were supposed to do, and we never got the chance to do it. This was the chance."

## Congregations and Connections

In a small town, can one congregation mount and support a project like Bethel House? The family practice physician whose homeless patient led to Bethel House creation, in his own words “stewed about what to do for a while.” He had found out about the situation in the spring of 1993, and approached the Stewardship and Missions Committee of the Congregational Church that he attended after the stewardship drive had been concluded in the fall of that year to see if he could get support for establishing a program for homeless families. In that meeting, he was told by one member “This is too big for our church.” That led him to explore the possibility of working with other churches. He first approached individuals in the large Methodist church and then reached out to other congregations.

This is consistent with the lack of capacity of many if not most of the congregations in the United States. “The finances of American congregations are, in the main, tight: one-half of them have annual budgets below \$100,000. They are generally understaffed: the average congregation employs 1.2 clergy and about that number of additional full-time staff. . . . Among all the congregations actually involved in social service activity, only 12 percent had a staff person devoting at least 25 percent of their time to these efforts. In 80 percent of these active congregations, fewer than thirty volunteers were engaged in service projects during the year of the study; in the median congregation, only ten people volunteered that year” (Baggett, 2002, pp 433-434).

With an ecumenical effort, however, there are more resources, people , dollars, and the connections and networks that church members have when you can draw from a number of congregations. “Congregations are linked to other parts of the community through the multiple memberships and loyalties of their members, but they are also linked as organizations to larger organizational networks. Most commonly, congregations are linked with various other local organizations in the pursuit of community-based goals” (Ammerman, 1997b, p. 360).

For an effort like Bethel House’s mission to homeless families, basing the board membership in the participating churches allowed other persons to become involved that would not have been approached if this had not been a congregation-based organization. Two of the board members stated:

- I wouldn’t be there if I hadn’t been part of a church.
- I’m not very introspective. I wouldn’t have been involved if I wasn’t in the church.

Lodging the board membership within the churches also puts the responsibility for replacing board members who leave back on these congregations. This is different from a traditional non-profit organization, where when a board member leaves, the board has the responsibility for finding a replacement.

In “Structure and Process in Community Self-Help Organizations”, Milfosky describes the problems that small, nonprofit organizations face in becoming established and maintaining themselves. These organizations

demand much energy from their leaders, have trouble both recruiting and maintaining volunteers, and raising the resources for their continued existence. As issues move and in out of the concern of the public, it is difficult to maintain a small organization (1988).

One of the ways that Bethel House has maintained a strong volunteer base was in replacing the original system of committees (maintenance, transportation help for residents, etc.) constituted from each congregation with a system in which each church become responsible for volunteers in all areas (transportation, painting, cleaning, and maintenance) on a rotational basis. The coordinator who instituted this says: "Looking back I think this was a real turning point for Bethel House. It made each church have ownership of the project. I think this is when the project really got into the churches hands. Prior to that, it was still seen as 'something that some of our church members are involved in'. I believe this is also what makes Bethel House so successful as an ecumenical project. It ensured that each church was committed to the project and that it was going to support it with workers, not just money. It also really clinched the support and blessing of all the churches and ministers."

On a monthly rotational basis each of the supporting churches of Bethel House are responsible for finding volunteers to help with transportation, painting, or cleaning, if needed. Each of the supporting churches has a Host Coordinator who is the liaison to that church. If volunteers are needed, the Coordinator calls the Host Coordinator who announces the needs in church and/or makes calls to members within their congregation. If special projects are done (ie Diaper Drive,

Cleaning Supply Drive, etc) each of the Coordinators coordinates the effort within their church. The Coordinator's perspective is: "I think the Host Coordinator role is important to our project because it involves a whole set of people who want more "hands on" work with Bethel House, but don't necessarily want to attend board meetings. It also involves more people in the project besides directors. The rotational basis has also been crucial because people aren't burnt out like they were in the beginning work committees."

Discussing the inherent relationship between volunteering and its effects of greater connectedness among participating individuals, Wuthnow puts forth that "volunteering builds bridges. It establishes relationships that people can draw on when they are organizing a community program" (2004, p.121). Host coordinators are able to utilize the networks of committed individuals within their congregations to pull from this wider base.

Ammerman states that the multiple memberships and networks of the church members link the churches to other parts of the community and the multiple networks of the church representatives on the Bethel House board have been a valuable asset in fund-raising. There are two fund-raising events each year for Bethel House, and this year over \$8000 was raised through the golf outing and \$3000 was raised in a quilt raffle. The majority of the money raised in the golf outing was through businesses and individuals buying \$100 hole sponsorship. Three founding board members—the two brothers who are co-owners of a farm implement company and an attorney—sold most of these through their business and other civic connections.

## Six Decisions that Shaped the Mission and Program

During the time between interested members from congregations began meeting to the time that the Bethel House board was formalized, the group began to make decisions about the form and substance of Bethel House. The original idea was to have a program for homeless families, and there were a number of decisions that had to be made before the idea could become a viable program. In retrospect, as the founding board members look back, it seems that correct decisions were made at six decision points. One member of that group, a social work professor, reflects: "We did not know what we were doing. I had been working with homeless families and had worked at one time with a century-old non-profit social service organization. But neither I nor any of the others had any experience in starting an organization."

The six key decisions are explained in this section.

*Should Bethel House serve only families?* While learning about a family that was homeless was the impetus for Bethel House, the original members were also aware that there were single individuals that were homeless. The scope of who should be served was discussed early on, before the large Methodist church had decided to lease Bethel House the house and duplex that it owned. One of the representatives from that Methodist Church, a farmer, stated in a meeting that unless it was just going to be for families, there would not be support for leasing the housing units. As board members were already leaning toward to limiting it to just families, the decision was then made.



That decision has been crucial for Bethel House in terms of community support. As one board member stated, “We may not agree with decisions that parents make, but then we think about the children.” There is undoubtedly greater support for homeless families with children than for homeless single individuals. A recent article in *Christian Century* ((McDonald, 2005) on giving patterns suggest that donors respond much more generously when the sufferers are perceived as innocent victims, those who appear to have done no wrong.

*Should we limit those we serve to the local area?* In trying to decide the scope of the geographical area served in Bethel House, the board finally settled on serving those living in the coverage area of the school district, which reaches into the smaller municipalities and rural areas around Whitewater. One board member stated: “It’s happening here and not in Africa.” Happening here meant that the community could see the impact of the Bethel House program; most congregations have had someone connected to their congregation’s members helped by Bethel House.

One long-time board member stated: “I was thinking about how someone said that our parameters were small, but I think that that’s why we are successful. We decided that this was the piece of the world that we could change.” In his book on ecumenical efforts in the Third World, *Not Angels but Agencies: The Ecumenical Response to Poverty—A Primer*, Michael Taylor writes: “One of the many lessons that the ecumenical movement has tried to teach me is to have wide horizons while keeping my feet on the ground in one particular place or, to put it in its own inimitable language, “think globally, act locally” (1995, p. vii).

*Should we require participating families to attend church?* There was heated discussion about this in early meetings, with some people stating that as this was a Christian organization, participating families should be worshipping in a Christian church. In one of the meetings, one member said “They will know that we are Christians by our love.” That was enough to convince everyone, and it was decided that the coordinator would ask families participating in Bethel House if they would like to be visited by a minister, and families would be connected to programs and services of local churches when appropriate.

Board members were asked: “Bethel House is a Christian organization. How do you think that this comes across or is communicated to the families that Bethel House serves?” These comments were representative of the board members’ responses (one person thought that families were required to attend church, two people were not sure or did not know):

- I would be resentful if a religious message would be a condition of serving someone.
- Do a good job of delicately balancing letting them know that it is churches that are supporting them but not push it on them to come to church.
- They are welcomed to be a part of a church. It’s not mandatory. They’re told about what’s available.
- If they are interested, they can get hooked up with one very easily.
- There’s no like, “you gotta go to church if we’re gonna help you.” I know they’ll encourage that you go to church. I don’t sense that it’s condition or that there are strings attached. They just perceive that these people from these churches are trying to help and they think it’s great.
- We don’t push that point. We encourage them to become involved in a church. Getting them into church is not the objective. Getting them back on their feet financially is.

This seems consistent with the profile of Golden Rule Christians that Ammerman (1997a) describes, where helping others is seen as much important than evangelism.

*Should Bethel House receive government funds?* When the members were first deciding how to support the program, one option that was discussed was to seek government funds; there was available funding for transitional housing programs available from the State of Wisconsin, Special Needs Programs. The consensus was that this was to be a program of the churches, then the responsibility for support should be on the churches. If there were government funds, then this would not be the case. Additionally, board members did not want to have the regulations and paperwork that come with government funding. Several times during the past twelve years the issue of seeking government funds has arisen, and board members refer back to the original decision and the rationale for keeping support local, and board members have effectively used the fact that Bethel House does not receive government funds in raising funds within their churches and the community.

*How should we decide which families to serve)?* With the decision not to accept government funds, this decision was “wide open.” A sub-committee met to consider this issue and what came out of that meeting was “We will serve the families where we think we can make a difference.” If the barriers were seen as too formidable or if the family’s needs were not that great, in deciding between families that were applying, those where it seemed that “we could make a difference” would be chosen.

*What limitations should be put on individuals serving on the board?*

One of the first decisions made was that the only persons representing participating churches would be board members. This has limited board

recruitment but it has placed and continues to place responsibility for Bethel House on the congregations. The board has adhered to this. In 2007, when the Board President moved twenty-five miles away when her husband accepted a position with a church in that community, the Coordinator asked for an exception to this so that (very effective) President could stay on. The board did not grant that exception.

All nonprofit organizations face the dilemma of how to balance the need to retain board members with commitment to the organization and organizational memory while also recruiting “new blood” to the organization. Bethel House addressed this in both enforcing the section in the by-law which stated that members could only serve two consecutive terms and in creating an exception in which the founding board members could serve as long as they wished.

In retrospect, two of these decisions have been most important and influential. Not taking government funds has given the organization the ability to be flexible, especially when it comes to modifying or making exception to its own rules. The second family helped was from outside the geographical area, but helped because the need was seen as great and it was a case where Bethel House could make a difference. In 2006, for the first time a single woman without children was housed for five months, as this was seen as a situation where the help was needed, there were no other options—and where Bethel House could make a difference.

Intersecting and Mutually Reinforcing Identity Formation

The commitment of board members, especially long-time board members, is critical to Bethel House success. They help recruit volunteers and new board members, sell raffle tickets for the quilt raffle and raise funds other ways, volunteer at the golf outing, and represent Bethel House to the community.

In the first planning meeting that went beyond the two original churches in 1994, seven people were present. All are still active in one way or another with Bethel House. One, an attorney, is an *ex officio* member and is consulted regularly on legal issues. The attorney, the family practice physician, another founding member who is now a top university administrator, and the social work professor, along with the sitting Board President, constitute the long-range planning committee. This committee meets twice annually, on average to conduct strategic planning. The social work professor and the other three attendees at that initial meeting are active board members.

What is responsible for this loyalty among these and other long-term board members and volunteers?

While the data do not support this to the degree that they support the other findings, the authors believe that there is a process of intersecting and mutually reinforcing identity formation that has been occurring.

These eight original board members had these three identities in common: all were Christians, and seven of the eight answers clearly fit with the “Golden Rule Christian” category; all were active in their churches (the majority on the equivalent of the Missions Committee); and all were active other ways either in the local community or in the region.

Related to Bethel House, these identities are congruent: one could say that the work of Bethel House is what I should be doing as a Christian, it is good for my church to be involved in this work, and Bethel House provides a needed service to the community.

The stories told in board meetings about the families' situations and the successes of Bethel House can serve to reinforce the conclusion that they are part of something significant. One founding member states: "When we went into this we had an opinion that we would have a low success ratio. I think we've all been surprised that it's worked out so well. We're successful." A six-year board member says: "I had no idea what this was about when I started. I've been amazed at what I've learned about the families since I've been here. Seeing families progress to being able to move out."

Wuthnow states that "stories help us encapsulate experience so that we can remember it. As we remember these experiences, our stories also become part of our subsequent life events, shaping them, and molding our interpretations of what is good and right" (1993, p. 68).

For many of the Board members, the stories they have heard of families helped and the work they have done with Bethel House have led to Bethel House being a part of their identity. The outward signs can be seen as a number of board members can be seen on temperate weekends wearing Bethel House baseball caps and T-shirts, originally developed for fund-raising events. A more telling sign is the conviction and emotion they display in their involvement with Bethel House, showing that they are Christians by their love.

## **Implications and Further Study**

With a qualitative research project of this kind, the attempt is to show the unique features of a situation or organization while also to present findings that may be applicable to other situations. The authors hope that this be useful to others engaged in ecumenical social service efforts.

There is much to be learned from this particular organization in this community that to date we have not attempted to understand. One of these is the degree to which the “Golden Rule Christian” categorization which fits with many of the current and former board members also applies to those who volunteer for Bethel House, especially the Host Coordinators.

It would also be worthwhile to interview leaders from the churches in the community that are not participating. To use a comparison from the war in Iraq, Bethel House is formed of a “coalition of the willing.” Four churches Four churches which are more evangelical have never participated, and a fifth, a large new evangelical church, has participated in very minor ways; often, there are not representatives from this church on the Bethel House board.

To the degree that Bethel House in Whitewater, Wisconsin is not an anomaly, its continued existence and growth are an indication that when individual Christians’ desire and actions to follow the teachings of Jesus are combined with the numbers and networks of multiple congregations, there is much that can be done.

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