Uneasy partners

By Lillian Daniel in the June 15, 2004 issue

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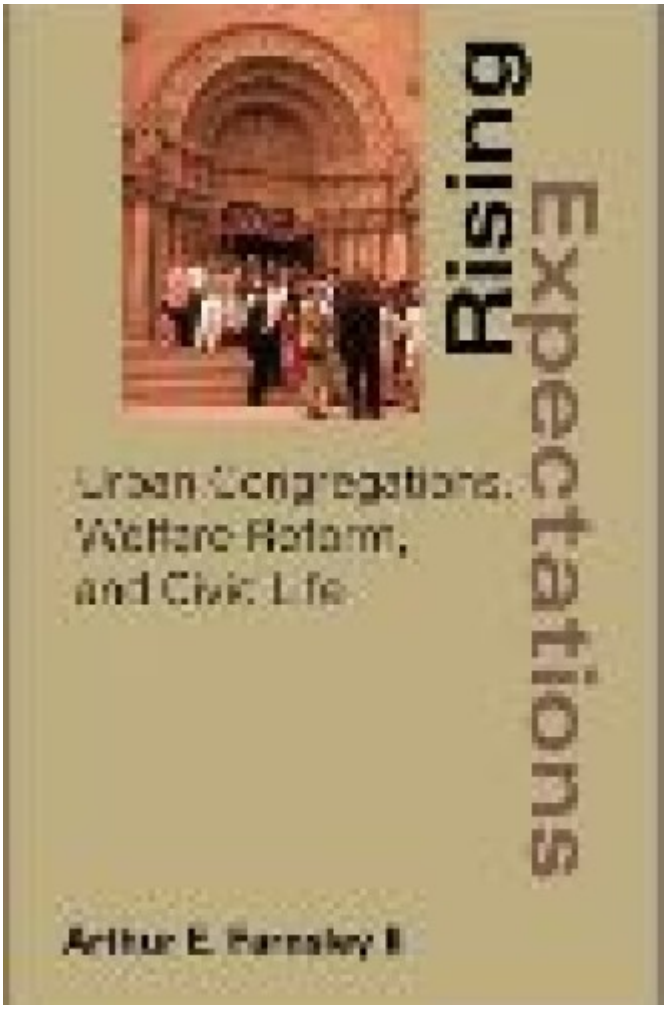

Rising Expectations: Urban Congregations, Welfare Reform, and Civic Life

Arthur E. Farnsley II
Indiana University Press

My Easter Sunday sermon preparation was interrupted this year by a two-hour emergency meeting at a local housing authority, where we discussed marketing plans, reserve funds and retaining walls. As a faith-based partner, our congregation is trying to build housing with money from our denomination and local churches. Helping us are an experienced consultant from the Bronx, enthusiastic volunteer leaders from New Haven and, of course, prayer.

At the end of a hot meeting, peppered with the usual misunderstandings and accusations, we resolved, as we usually do, that we are all people of good will and that the partnership will move forward. But we were also reminded, as we usually are, that faith-based organizations and housing authorities operate very differently. I often leave these meetings that involve pastors, community organizers, contractors and bureaucrats wishing we had a translator—someone who could bridge the culture gap between our worlds, speak both church and municipal dialects, and pick up on our various Byzantine customs and systemic social cues.

Into this communication gap steps Arthur E. Farnsley, a senior research associate for the Polis Center, an urban think tank. Farnsley turns his sociological lens on Indianapolis to report on years of Lilly Endowment– funded research about how, when and where faith-based social service partnerships are taking place. For those who place their hope for welfare reform, urban revitalization and the future of social service provision on local churches, Farnsley sounds a cautionary note. He hopes that their expectations will become more realistic, lest crucial services be duplicated, botched or left undone.

The concept of church-based social services gained national attention in 2001, when the Bush administration touted the notion that such services promised smaller government, less bureaucracy and more local control—with religious values as the cherry on top of the sundae.

But the movement has deeper, bipartisan roots. Over a decade ago, a Democrat, former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros, argued that faith communities could best address urban poverty. During the ’90s Cisneros promoted the role of congregations in civic life.

While religious groups have always provided services in cities, during the past decade the focus has shifted from well-known groups such as Catholic Charities or the Jewish Federation to smaller worshiping communities that have suddenly been

empowered to apply for grants that make them partners with the government in new ways. Local churches are being called into service to solve everything from flaws in the welfare system, to the lack of social capital, to the excesses of big government. Can the average church meet these rising expectations? Farnsley suggests that while some may, most cannot and will not under present circumstances.

One of the biggest problems is that most congregations lack the information to be effective partners in urban development and service provision. Farnsley notes that most churches know little about “how government works, how grants and contracts are awarded or how human service programs are administrated and evaluated. In truth most congregations do not even know much about how other congregations work.”

Farnsley found that unless churches had a personal connection to a social service organization through a church member, or had a full-time community minister whose job was to connect the congregation to such agencies, they usually could not keep up with all they needed to know about grant writing, program administration and the range of services already being provided.

“Most congregations are relatively small organizations with limited resources,” he explains. “They exist to provide opportunities for worship and character development for members and their children. They are not tightly tied to the neighborhood where their facilities lie, nor do most of the members live there.”

The information gap extends as well to the social service agencies, many of which are ignorant of the congregations around them or harbor lingering fears about the legitimacy of church-state partnerships. Farnsley calls upon city and nonprofit managers to receive training concerning the religious presence and capacity in their areas, rather than seeing the churches, synagogues and mosques as mysterious “black boxes.”

“When people in government or nonprofit leadership complain that ‘the churches here don’t do anything,’ they may be right—or they may simply have no idea of what the congregations really do or why,” Farnsley states. Until service providers and religious leaders learn more about one another’s world, they will be hampered in their ability to work together.

Since the current trend of mixing the private, the secular and the sacred shows signs of continuing, Farnsley recommends that public-policy programs teach about religious organizations and that government and foundation leaders share information with religious organizations. Theological education, too, could do more to teach future ministers about their potential secular partners. Yet as social service providers and religious institutions, both underfunded, struggle to exist, who has time for this? Research indicates that congregations and agencies with more resources will be more likely to afford the staff time to make these partnerships work.

Farnsley's view may seem overly pessimistic in regard to those churches already successfully involved in faith-based partnerships. Some may be offended that Farnsley does not enthusiastically advance the argument, popularized by Robert Putnam, that congregations uniquely promote social capital. Instead, given the racial, class and ethnic homogeneity of most congregations, Farnsley suspects that they don't even do as good a job as other organizations in this much-vaunted arena. Furthermore, his general premise that we cannot assume that churches know much about their neighborhood may rub many socially active parishioners the wrong way.

But Farnsley does not belittle the local church efforts that are succeeding. Nor does he want to downplay the social importance of congregations. Rather, he wants to moderate the broadest and boldest claims according to which local congregations hold the key to meeting social-service needs.

Farnsley's attitude toward churches seems to be one of parental protection, of not wanting congregations to too quickly enter a world they do not understand and in which they are not equipped to be successful. Churches already involved in faith-based partnerships will find his book provocative; churches standing shakily on the edge of such partnerships, mustering the courage to jump in, will find it wise. The water's not as fine as we may think, though we may want to plunge in nonetheless.

We'll keep trying to build houses here in New Haven, armed with Farnsley's sage advice that when the secular and sacred work in partnership, they can never learn too much about one another. Calls for better training, clearer information and more resources make sense to me, as does his cautionary word not to expect too much until these things are in place. But as Farnsley notes, many of us are learning as we go. As social expectations shift, we rely on the oldest translator of all, the Holy Spirit, who has a pretty good record on bridging the gaps in strange partnerships.