

## **ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL CAPITAL AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS**

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Paper presented at the 2000 annual meeting of the CBFA annual conference, Buffalo

Abstract: In the past thirty years, a large and growing body of research into a construct called social capital has developed. Social capital scholarship has focused on three distinct levels of analysis: individual, organizational, and societal. Recent scholarship on *organizational* social capital has sought to explain differences in organizational-level outcomes; such scholarship might have broad applicability to the study of religious organizations like congregations. In this paper, a recently-developed model of organizational social capital will be used to (1) demonstrate why religious institutions matter and (2) examine several issues facing contemporary religious institutions.

## ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL CAPITAL AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

What do religious institutions do in society, and why do they matter? There has been significant discussion in recent years—in both the popular and scholarly press—of religious institutions (Christian colleges, denominations, parachurch organizations, local congregations) and their purpose and role in society.

One of the reasons that religious institutions matter is that they are generators and repositories for what can be termed “social capital.” As voluntary organizations, religious institutions require ongoing commitment from their members in order to engage in collective action—whether in worship, evangelism, or social service. Unlike for-profit organizations—for which remuneration is one reason why people participate—religious organizations need to generate commitment on the basis of values and common assent to organizational goals alone.<sup>1</sup> There is, in short, a need for good theory that explains why some religious organizations work well (here defined in terms of enacting the organization’s mission) and others do not—in addition to explaining why religious institutions matter as social institutions.

In this paper, I will use the recently-defined construct of “organizational social capital” to explore (1) why religious institutions matter, (2) how religious institutions might function better and (3) some of the issues facing contemporary religious institutions. The essential point to make is that religious organizations are *organizations*, and so can (and should) be analyzed using various organizational-level theories and constructs. I propose that religious institutions with high stocks of organizational social capital do a better job of enacting their values and missions than organizations with low stocks of organizational social capital. Further, religious

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that assent to values and common goals is inoperative as a rationale for participation in for-profit organizations, but rather that religious institutions rely almost exclusively on intrinsic rewards. In some sense, this makes managing religious organizations harder, because extrinsic rewards (remuneration) are not available as motivators.

organizations help teach the tools and personal habits of practices necessary for people to participate in other spheres of organizational and public life. Finally, both mainline and evangelical organizations face different challenges with regard to building, sustaining, and using organizational social capital in order to both define and then to further their missions in the world.

After briefly exploring the genesis of the term “social capital,” I will describe the organizational social capital model of Leana and Van Buren (1999), and conclude with some implications of the organizational social capital model for religious institutions.

### **WHY “SOCIAL CAPITAL?”**

Few terms in social science have captured the public’s attention in recent years as has “social capital.” Since Putnam’s 1995 (see also Putnam, 1993, 2000) article “Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital,” there has been significant discussion and explication of the term—although there is as yet little convergence or coherence in defining (1) what the term means and (2) what utility it has for organizational research (van Meter, 1999). The intuitive appeal of the term is obvious: both “social” and “capital” tend to have positive meanings, and “social capital” (no matter how defined) builds on voluntary social relationships in society in the service of benefit creation. Portes (1999) has noted that the use of the social capital concept is inherently value laden: a person using the term fills it with whatever normative content he or she favors. As one reviewer of a prominent social capital book has noted, there is a danger of a circular argument inherent to discussions of social capital: the decline of social capital (however defined) leads to an effect on some dependent variable (whatever it is) and the solution is to restore social capital.

Criticisms of the social capital concept aside, it is clear that it is a concept that has real rhetorical power; further, it might serve as a useful middle-range theory to take up a variety of organizational-level research questions, as Leana and Van Buren (1999) suggest.

### **The genesis of “social capital”**

Despite the recent recovery of the phrase, social capital is not a new concept. A 1997 discussion (Borgatti, Jones, and Everett, 1999) on the SOcNET listserv identified various sources for the term. The earliest use of the term—uncovered by Robert Putnam, one of the leading contemporary social capital theorists—seems to come from Hanifan (1920: 78-79), who offered this definition:

Social capital defined. In the use of the phrase “social capital” no reference is made to the usual acceptation of the term “capital,” except in a figurative sense. We refer not to real estate or personal property or to cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make those tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals who make up a social unit.

In more recent years, a number of network theorists have used the term to signify what might be called “private-goods social capital”; the value to an individual person or firm of his/her/its social networks—and by extension, the resources made available to that individual that are mediated through the network (Belliveau, O’Reilly and Wade, J, 1996; Burt 1992, 1997; Flap and de Graaf, 1986). The person who generates private-goods social capital is the same person who both uses it and benefits from its usage. Someone (Burt, 1997) who is the center of a social network can connect otherwise disconnected others and in so doing create brokerage opportunities for himself; such centrality is a kind of social capital. Granovetter (1973, 1985)

found that a person's network of ties can in many instances help her find a job; in particular, "weak ties" provide information benefits outside of one's social network and are particularly helpful in finding and changing jobs). Individuals therefore have strong incentives to "invest" in private-goods social capital.

In contrast to private-goods conceptualizations of social capital are those explications of the concept that emphasize social capital as a public good. Social capital as a public good is based on collective values, norms, and shared trust. Here social capital is a collective asset that individuals have incentives and disincentives to invest in; here the collective benefits directly and the individual indirectly from its existence. Many conceptualizations of public-goods social capital are sited at the societal or regional level (Fukuyama, 1999; Putnam, 1993), although more recent work by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) and Leana and Van Buren (1999) has developed an organizational-level social capital construct. In contrast to private-goods models, public-goods models of social capital emphasize individual disincentives to contribute to the collective via actions that enhance social capital. The payoff from individuals' actions to enhance public-goods social capital accrues to the social unit as a whole and only indirectly back to the individual (Leana and Van Buren, 1999); rational individuals will not subordinate individual goals to collective goals—a necessary component of organizational social capital—unless they believe that doing so is in their interest.

### **THE ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL CAPITAL MODEL**

Although the definitions of the term vary, social capital can be broadly defined as an intangible asset that inheres in social relations and networks (Leana and Van Buren, 1999). Social capital has been located at four levels of analysis:

- The individual level; here, social capital is an asset of an individual person or firm based on the information and resource value of his, her, or its network (Burt, 1992; 1997; Belliveau, O'Reilly, and Wade, 1996).
- The organizational level, in which social capital is understood as some combination of norms, habits, shared understandings, and organizational structures that support collective action (Leana and Van Buren, 1999; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).
- The industry level, in which social capital within an industry promotes the welfare of both individual firms within the industry and the industry as a whole (Walker, Kogut, and Shan, 1997).
- The societal level, in terms of norms or attributes shared among people in a region that support civility and maintenance of the common good (Putnam, 1993).

Each of these levels of analysis has been the subject of considerable theory development in the past decade. “Social capital” is an appealing construct—whatever the level of analysis—because it relies on the existence of voluntary relationships between individuals as a source of advantage.

One of the issues with regard to social capital in organizations is how human resource policies and practices build and sustain social capital. On this point there are a number of possible perspectives. One perspective focuses on human capital contributions by individuals based on analyses of individual, private-goods social capital (Belliveau *et al.*, 1996; Burt, 1997). Here the emphasis is on the linkages between individual persons or firms within a social network and their utility in building advantage. Burt (1992), for example, suggests that competition is never perfect; social capital is the criterion that determines whether an individual in an organization gets an opportunity over other, equally-able individuals. The possibility of personal advantage in such models of social capital is based on one’s social position in a network (for

example, her centrality) and the structure of the network itself (networks rich in structural holes are more beneficial to persons who span them). The holder of private-goods social capital is the primary beneficiary of its use.

Another perspective—and the one that informs the present paper—focuses on organizational-level social capital. Leana and Van Buren define organizational social capital (1999: 538) as “a resource reflecting the character of social relationships within the firm. Organizational social capital is realized through members’ levels of collective goal orientation and shared trust, which create value by facilitating successful collective action.” Organizational social capital has two components (the remainder of this section is drawn from Leana and Van Buren (1999) unless indicated otherwise):

### **Component 1: Associability**

Associability is defined as the willingness and ability of organizational participants to subordinate individual goals and associated actions to collective goals and actions. The associability construct draws on studies of the interaction between social interactions and economic activities (Banfield, 1958; Sable, 1993; Tocqueville, 1945). The associability component reflects a basic fact of human existence: individuals have considerable autonomy in deciding with which institutions to affiliate, but they will not affiliate with an organization (and then subordinate their individual goals to the direct achievement of the organization’s objectives) unless they (1) share the organization’s values, (2) believe that the organization will allow them to enact their values, and (3) believe that the organization will provide intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to them that are commensurate with their contributions to the organization (see the subsequent subsection on trust).

Why associability, as opposed to sociability? The propensity to socialize is universal, but the ability to do so for the achievement of a collective purpose is not. Associability therefore has an affective component (the willingness and propensity to subordinate individual goals to collective goals) and a skill-based component (the ability to coordinate activities). Individuals within the organization must be able to agree upon collective goals in order to work together effectively (see Banfield, 1958; Putnam, 1993; Sable, 1993). But in order to avoid the nearly-inevitable losses of productivity that occur when groups act in concert (see Karau and Williams, 1993 on social loafing and Kerr, 1993 on free-riding), the group's members must individually and collectively be skilled in socializing in ways that serve collective goal achievement; not all social interaction leads to sustained, efficient collective action. Organizations with high levels of associability are composed of individuals who are able and willing to agree upon goals that are effected through collective action.

### **Component 2: Trust**

The organizational social capital model draws on two distinctions from the voluminous literature on trust. The first distinction—fragile versus resilient trust—comes from the work of Ring (1996) and Ring and Van de Ven (1992). Fragile trust depends on short-term calculations of benefits from a relationship, while resilient trust is based on stronger and more numerous links between the organization and its members. Resilient trust survives the occasional transaction in which costs and benefits aren't equilibrated; fragile trust does not. Resilient trust is a necessary condition for and an indicator of organizational social capital; individuals who are members of organizations in which organizational social capital is absent are likely to rely on fragile trust, exiting the organization when that form of trust no longer holds.

The second distinction—dyadic versus generalized trust—comes from the work of Putnam (1993). Organizations depend not just on trust between members of a dyad (individuals who are known to each other), but also on trust between an individual and others in an organization unknown to that individual. This latter kind of trust is called generalized trust, which should be understood as complementary to dyadic trust. Generalized trust relies on shared norms and behaviors—based on organizational membership and concomitant shared schemas of meaning (see Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998 on the cognitive and relational dimensions of social capital; also Weick, 1995 on sensemaking in organizations)—which are generalized to the social unit as a whole. Organizations need high levels of generalized trust in order to engage in successful collective action. Organizations with large stocks of organizational social capital exhibit high levels of dyadic trust among people who know each other and high levels of generalized trust extended to unknown others, based on common assent to the organization's mission. Both kinds of trust are necessary for organizations to function effectively.

Both associability and trust are necessary for organizational social capital to exist in an organization. Associability without trust is unlikely to be an equilibrium condition in a voluntary organization; individuals are not likely to remain in organizations that are not trustworthy or to work with untrustworthy individuals. Trust without associability means that individuals in an organization neither agree upon nor are able to effect common goals, which ultimately means that the organization will cease to exist as a common enterprise.

It should be noted that organizational social capital is a by-product of other organizational activities that is nevertheless integral to the success of collective action. It should be noted that some of the earliest work on social capital, by the late sociologist James Coleman (1988), drew on studies of Catholic schools to explain why their drop-out rates were

significantly lower than public-school rates; he concluded that the multiplex structures connecting religious structures (Catholic parishes within a diocese) with educational structures (the Catholic schools themselves) increased the amount of parental and community involvement in the lives of students, leading to a salutary effect on drop-out rates (see also Greeley, 1997). In the next section, I briefly summarize some of the implications of applying the organizational social capital model to the study of religious institutions.

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The general implication of the organizational social capital model for religious institutions is that they face the same problems as do for-profit and government entities: religious institutions need to build organizational social capital in order to accomplish their goals (however defined).

Religious institutions therefore need to build associability and trust (resilient, dyadic, and generalized trust).

More importantly, however, the organizational social capital offers a particular sort of counsel to religious institutions. The shared schemas of meaning and purpose implicit in the associability construct suggest that religious institutions “work” best when they have a clear sense of purpose and reason for being. Such counsel may not seem to be terribly interesting and profound, but a number of researchers have made similar arguments. Working from a rational-choice framework, Iannaccone (1994; see also Ellison, 1995) suggests that “strict” churches—churches that place high demands for conformity and orthodoxy on their members—create higher commitment (mostly because they avoid the problems of free-riding associated with low-commitment organizations).<sup>2</sup> Of course, “strictness” is often cast in terms of religious conservatism—but religious conservatism is not a requirement for churches to build strong social

capital. Rather, what is necessary is some shared sense of common purpose—whatever that might be—that brings individual believers together for a collective purpose. Seeking social justice as a faithful response to God’s calling on their lives could serve just as well as such a purpose as does a desire to live out fully the Great Commission. Although further empirical research could and should be done in the area, I propose that any religious institution can build organizational social capital to the degree that it creates, maintains, and sustains a shared sense of purpose (in addition to all of the kinds of trust previously described).

In the remainder of this section, I will briefly explore the implications of the organizational social capital for pastoral leadership, consider why religious institutions matter from an organizational social capital standpoint, and close with counsel for mainline and conservative religious institutions.

### **Implications for pastoral leadership**

With regard to pastoral leadership, an organizational social capital perspective suggests that ordained clergy might function best as facilitators of social capital; in this line of argument, clergy members would focus on helping to develop a vision with a worshipping community and then helping to engender the associability and trust needed to enact that vision. Such a conceptualization of pastoral leadership might help to avoid clergy frustration and burnout while changing the form of seminary training; Huse, Van Buren, & Hansen (forthcoming) found that pastors who left full-time ordained ministry expressed significant frustration about their lack of formal training in facilitating cooperation and teamwork. More generally, an organizational social capital perspective on pastoral leadership suggests some level of shared governance and leadership.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, many folks—including adherents to such traditions—would no doubt object to the application of a rational-choice framework to individual or collective religious choices.

This last point might seem counterintuitive, given the previous emphasis I placed on the need for a strong sense of shared purpose. An observant reader might reasonably ask whether a strong religious leader (using a hierarchical form of governance) might not do a better job of fostering such a shared purpose than a leader that encourages the community to participate in the formulation and enactment of a shared vision. The essential point to make here is that it is one thing to formulate a sense of shared identity and quite another to get others to enact it voluntarily. Leana and Van Buren (1999: 549) note that “[i]n organizations strong in social capital, mutual commitment is characteristic of relationships between employee and employer, but also of relationships among organizational members.” Substituting “pastor” (or other religious leader) for “employer” and parishioner for “employee” makes clear the need for pastoral leadership that helps develop a vision in conjunction with a worshipping community and then helping to engender the associability and trust needed to enact that shared (and collectively-defined) vision.

Further, focusing the attention of pastoral leaders on building and sustaining organizational social capital help reorient how they function as managers. Like their for-profit counterparts, pastoral leaders (and heads of other religious organizations) often have a short-term orientation. Just as the CEO focuses on quarterly profit, the minister might focus on yearly budget figures or increases in attendance. Such a short-term orientation is not so much wrong as it is short-sighted. Organizations of all kinds need to invest in maintenance of the social system that makes collective action possible. Because organizational social capital is a resource that is the by-product of shared trust and successful collective action (Leana and Van Buren, 2000), pastoral leaders need manage in ways that ensure high commitment and shared trust. Helping

pastoral leaders acquire the skills necessary to build and sustain organizational social capital is therefore a critical challenge for seminaries, denominations, and congregations.

### **Organizational social capital as an explanation for why religious institutions matter**

At the organizational level, individual congregations play two critical roles with regard to social capital: they generate the basic social capital of association in addition to the civic capital of communication and organizational skills—particularly for the least advantaged members of society. Religious institutions matter in large part because they build and enhance the civic skills necessary to build social capital in a variety of other societal institutions (like business and other parts of the voluntary sector), as studies of evangelical and Pentecostal institutions in repressive societies have demonstrated (see Sherman, 1997).

In his study of religious institutions in New Haven, Connecticut, Hall (1999) found that religious institutions not only fostered civic engagement, they actually taught the tools of civic engagement to their members in ways that were transferable to a variety of contexts. Similarly, Ammerman (1996: 5) suggests that “in addition to the basic social capital generated in the associative arenas of congregations and other voluntary organizations, such groups have a special responsibility of being the places where otherwise voiceless people have a voice, where those denied leadership in other social arenas learn to lead.” When members of religious organizations work together—whether in providing social services, leading a youth group, or evangelizing their communities—they are doing more than performing particular tasks. Collective action in the religious sphere teaches the habits of practice necessary to build organizational social capital, not only in that organization, but in other organizations as well. The skills necessary to sustain shared purpose and collective action (consistent with building

organizational social capital) are therefore portable; in the absence of religious institutions, less civic engagement and collective action would occur.<sup>3</sup>

In short, religious institutions matter (from a societal standpoint) because they are both teachers and repositories of social capital. Wuthnow (2000: 408-409) notes that “faith-based communities remain such a crucial reservoir of social capital in America that it is hard to see how we could redress the erosion [of social capital at the national/cultural level] without a major religious contribution. . . it is undeniable that religion has played a major role in every period of civic revival in American history.” When religious institutions build strong organizational social capital, they make a significant contribution to civic revival—not only by doing what they do collectively, but also by teaching the skills and habits of practice that individuals need to participate more fully in every sphere of society, individually and collectively.

### **The challenges of organizational social capital for mainline and conservative religious institutions**

I would be remiss in my discussion of organizational social capital if I did not look forward to the challenges facing religious institutions. I propose that mainline and conservative religious institutions face different challenges with regard to building and sustaining organizational social capital.

Mainline religious institutions need to develop a narrative for congregation/religious life that is fundamentally rooted in religious faith; as Cox (1995:69) has noted, “without roots, disembodied values become mere preferences and dissolve into the ether.” Such religious institutions have sought to be tolerant and open to a variety of perspectives; in isolation,

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<sup>3</sup> Why do religious institutions play such a critical role? It might be that other voluntary associations could play a similar role of teaching the skills necessary to build and sustain social capital. But Ammerman (1995) properly points out that congregations have historically been gateways to participation in the larger social order because belonging to a religious community has a moral weight not ascribed to other memberships. Because religious organizations are “presumptively legitimate” (Warner, 1994; cited in Ammerman, 1995), they have a special role to

openness and tolerance can be virtues. But the flip side of openness and tolerance can be an inability to explain why someone should be a member of that particular religious institution at all. One can be open and tolerant just as easily at home on Sunday morning as he or she can attending a service at a mainline congregation. Without such a coherent narrative that can then form the basis for demanding greater commitment from their members, mainline religious institutions in the United States will continue their decline.

Formulating such a narrative is possible for mainline religious organizations. It bears noting that the civil rights movement of the 1960s was largely led by such organizations. It might well be that such religious organizations might play a similar prophetic role in contemporary American society. Cox (1999) points out that the market and the neoclassical economics-based assumptions that underlie its operation are often discussed as if they were a form of religion rather than a system of exchange. Perhaps mainline religious institutions might critically call into question this conflation of the market with God (which is, after all, a form of idolatry) and then help their members think about how they might respond to the demands of the market on their lives and on society. Mainline religious institutions might take as their charge, therefore, the inspiration of ethical behavior in the marketplace based on deep Christian convictions (see Nash, 2000). Such a *raison d'être* would be better than none at all—and in fact would serve to bring people into a faithful relationship with God while fulfilling the church's prophetic role.

Conservative religious institutions, on the other hand, already have coherent narratives that build and sustain social capital—and by extension, provide the foundation for institutional growth. Such institutions have sought to play a greater role in the public sphere (particularly

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play vis-à-vis teaching the skills of civic engagement and collective action that strongly correlate with organizational social capital.

with regard to providing social services as a step toward religiously-based solutions to social problems), but there is still reticence among many conservative Christians to playing this sort of role in society. Recent studies (Chaves, 1999) indicate that conservative Christian congregations are less likely than liberal congregations to pursue the “charitable choice” opportunities engendered by welfare reform. Conservative Christian institutions therefore need to develop narratives for congregational life that treat greater engagement in (and service to) the civic public sphere as necessary conditions of Christian conviction; in short, to use their stocks of social capital in ways that bring about greater service to society as one element of their organizational missions.

In short, it is not enough for conservative religious institutions to build memberships and new buildings for their own sake (witness the “church growth” movement). Like the charge I specified for mainline religious organizations, conservative religious organizations need to witness collectively to God’s calling in our lives—individually and collectively. Because service to others—our neighbors—is a part of our calling, conservative religious institutions need to reflect this calling in their own activities. Further, such institutions have a prophetic role to play. All too often, religious conservatives have not participated in the movements for justice—of which the civil rights struggle is but one—that have been the hallmark of mainline institutions. A more publicly-engaged set of conservative religious institutions would no doubt have some interesting things to say about justice and capitalism. The strong organizational social capital of such institutions therefore needs to be put to uses broader than just building their own institutions. All religious institutions, after all, are called to be co-creators with God of God’s will for the world.

## CONCLUSION

An organizational social capital perspective on religious institutions can contribute much to our understanding of them (and their members), and in particular might explain how American religious institutions might remain vibrant participants in American society. All too often, social scientists and management academics have ignored religious institutions; understanding how religious institutions create and sustain organizational social capital might well change this lack of appreciation for the contribution that religious institutions can (and do) make to society.

As organizational scholars, CBFA members can and should use the tools of our disciplines to study religious institutions, to help improve their functioning, and to think critically about what they do and why they do it. There is a need for the application of scholarship (in addition to developing new theory) about religious institutions. Further, such organizations are good fora for testing organizational theories. Applying the organizational social capital to the study of religious institutions is offered as one such contribution.

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