Stewardship: Protecting Your Faith-Based Organization During a Crisis

Napa Legal Institute (NLI) Staff

Feature: Faith-Based Organizations and the Coronavirus Pandemic

Opening Essay

“Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1: 2-5

The Coronavirus pandemic is already changing the way we live, work, and even worship for the foreseeable future. In addition to the tragic loss of life and the permeating fear that accompanies such uncertainty, schools, businesses, nonprofits, and other organizations have all but shutdown in an effort to “flatten the curve” so that the spread of the virus doesn’t grow at an exponential rate.

During times like these, when we are shaken out of the comfort of our ordinary lives faced with an existential threat, it’s imperative that we rely first and foremost on our faith. As a virtue, faith is not just a feeling or an abstract concept. Rather, it is “the source and goal of [our] Christian practice.”

This is especially important for those leading faith-based organizations during times of national crisis. Whether it’s a ministry, a lay apostolate, or a charity, these organizations operate with the understanding that “faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26).

Despite the challenging circumstances, faith-based organizations may be needed now more than ever. It is possible to maintain operations in order to serve those in need, but in doing so we must practice prudence so that we do not endanger the lives of others or exacerbate the situation.

To that end, NLI is publishing a special series about how to manage your faith-based organization during a time of crisis. Our friends, allies, and working group members represent a wide range of experiences and expertise. We have invited several of them to respond to this opening post with their unique perspectives on organizational leadership, spiritual fortitude, corporate management, and other insights that we hope will prove helpful in the coming weeks.

As faith-based organizations continue to serve their communities, it is vital that they are educated to understand best practices, prepare their organization properly so that they can continue services, and are equipped to respond to community needs so as to ultimately protect the faith and continue carrying out their mission in a safe and prudential manner.

Understand the Threat

Guidelines issued by the President, Center for Disease Control (CDC), and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), emphasize that the next two weeks are essential in slowing the spread of the virus. When high volumes of individuals are infected in short windows of time, our healthcare systems are more likely to be overwhelmed, and fewer people are able to receive the tests and treatments they need.

Churches across the nation are suspending in-person services due to the risk that close contact poses. For Catholics, the Vatican has granted a plenary indulgence for those suffering from the pandemic as Pope Francis renews his invitation to pray incessantly for those who are sick. Churches and faith-based organizations around the world are working to offer spiritual formation during isolation and quarantine.
It is important that faith-based organizations embrace the responsibility that they have as community leaders. As a place people go to seek guidance and comfort, spiritual leaders can be greatly influential in the example they set.

An important way to be a resource for your community is to stay informed of new guidelines and regulations, acting within those guidelines, and communicating and encouraging your constituents to take the necessary and appropriate measures as well. The CDC has created a special website for faith-based organizations where the latest updates about the virus and the national response can be found.

**Prepare Your Organization**

Implementing safety measures is not only essential to protecting those who work in support of your organization, it is also essential in setting an example and in being able to continue to serve others.

1. **Remote work**

Many areas of the country have already implemented shelter-in-place or safer-at-home orders for all non-essential services, and the President advises working from home whenever possible. Evaluate how you might be able to support staff who depend on hourly wages, develop infrastructure for tele-communicating, and continue to educate yourself on evolving federal and local guidelines.

2. **Establish protocol**

Think through in advance what the protocol of your organization will be if someone on your team or in your care becomes infected. Respect the privacy of the individual while also ensuring that those with whom they had close contact with are informed so that they may take appropriate isolation and quarantine measures.

**Continuing Services**

Adaptation and flexibility can help your organization continue in its support of the community.

1. **Practice social distancing**

Remember that COVID-19 can be spread by asymptomatic carriers. In continuing to serve your communities, practice social distancing. Think creatively of methods to strengthen community over online platforms. Defer to health professionals on best practices when seeking to provide aid to the most vulnerable.

2. **Partner with Other Organizations**

Find community partners who might have the existing infrastructure to help you reach the community and continue services in new ways. Work with local health officials to understand how subsidiarity can best be implemented in your community.

**Respond to Evolving Needs**

New needs are rapidly appearing for vulnerable populations. Faith-based organizations, when properly prepared, have the flexibility to respond quickly to evolving problems. This new reality requires social distancing, but also care for the vulnerable. Don't underestimate the power of creative thinking when addressing the increased need for community in times of isolation.
1. Develop Methods of Communication

Ensure that you are aware of new community needs by taking care to remain connected and in communication with community members. Let people know how you are adapting in the crisis and how they can help or receive help.

2. Remain Goal-Oriented

Remember that as the means for achieving your goals change, your ultimate objective as a faith-based organization – whether it’s in service to your neighbor, the Common Good, or the Church – is as important as ever.

3. Share Information

Uncertainty can exacerbate anxiety for many people, particularly those most vulnerable or most impacted by the outbreak. By sharing information about how your organization will continue to serve people, and by listening to the information shared with you, you have the capacity to help alleviate worry and create a sense of hope for those with whom you interact.

Keep the Faith

When practicing prudential stewardship during times of crisis, we encourage you to find solace and strength first and foremost in your faith. At NLI, our team is reminded of the driving force behind our own work—to empower evangelization. When trials and tribulations disrupt your usual operating procedures, that is when your dependence on Him proves most important. Maintain your perspective and remember why you started your faith-based organization despite the enormous challenges ahead.

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*Leadership: Leading Your Faith-Based Organization During A Crisis* by Alan Sears