

## What role can faith play in innovation?

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By Catherine Cheney

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In New Kru Town, Liberia, a Catholic Relief Services staffer meets with community volunteers to discuss the importance of vaccines and immunizations. Photo by: Jim Stipe / CRS

SAN FRANCISCO — When Catholic Relief Services put together a proposal to change how society cares for children in orphanages, as part of the MacArthur Foundation’s competition for a \$100 million grant, it had to figure out how the Catholic Church could go from being part of the problem to part of the solution.

“There is a long history of Catholic institutions setting up orphanages,” said Shannon Senefeld, senior vice president for overseas operations at CRS, an international humanitarian organization that was founded by Catholic bishops in 1943 and today is the international humanitarian agency of the United States Catholic Community. “We knew that if we took this on, it was not going to be easy, because we had to solve a problem within the Catholic Church as well. But everyone agreed you don’t shy away from something just because it’s hard. We have to address this problem even though it’s not easy for us institutionally.”

To tackle the problem, CRS brought together a number of organizations, including groups of different faiths. The goal was to make sure the conversation was not about whether orphanages were good or bad, but rather where children belong, Senefeld said. The answer, they agreed, was in families.

So their [application to the MacArthur Foundation](#) focused on reuniting children with families and turning orphanages into family service providers. The organization called hundreds of parishes giving money to orphanages overseas, asking whether they would be willing to change. They went to 40 Catholic-run orphanages in Zambia and asked whether they would be willing to open their doors to CRS in order to determine why these kids were in their care and whether their parents would let them back in.

“It was not easy,” Senefeld told Devex. “Usually, it’s: ‘let’s respond to local needs as defined by local partners on the ground.’ This was different. It’s: ‘let’s work with people on the ground to change the way they do something.’”

Earlier this year, Devex posed the question: [Are innovation labs delivering on their promise?](#) The story featured examples of organizations that have tested out and improved upon models of innovation in global health, international development, and humanitarian response. But does innovation work differently at faith-based organizations?

## Power in partnerships

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The civil conflict in the Central African Republic took a religious turn following a coup in March 2013. With the support of armed groups, Michel Djotodia became the first Muslim president in a predominantly Christian country. A violent opposition movement fought against the alliance of groups behind the coup, but also carried out attacks on other Muslim civilians.

The U.S. Agency for International Development, together with private sector donors, saw the value that an interfaith partnership could bring to this environment of fear and mistrust — an environment they knew had the potential to undermine the long-term stability of the country. With the Central African [Interfaith Peacebuilding Partnership](#), partners including CRS, [Islamic Relief Worldwide](#), and [World Vision International](#) are focused on vocational training and livelihoods programs; trauma healing workshops and peace education programs; and capacity building in peacebuilding and social cohesion for local religious and civil society institutions.

Too often, talk of innovation focuses on technology, “but not enough attention is paid to innovation in process and innovation in methods.” That is where the faith community stands out, said J. Mark Brinkmoeller, senior advisor for external affairs and government relations at US African Development Foundation.

Brinkmoeller is former director of the [Center for Faith Based-and Community Initiatives](#) at USAID, which former U.S. President George W. Bush launched in 2001. Under former President Barack Obama, it continued to pursue three main goals: providing a bridge for faith-based groups to connect with USAID’s mission; convening these groups and catalyzing new opportunities for collaboration; and eliminating barriers these groups might otherwise come across in partnering with USAID. Brinkmoeller said he is confident the initiative will remain a priority under the new administration, noting USAID Administrator Mark Green’s own experience of working with faith-based civil society partners.

“Donor agencies are hyper transactional, whereas faith-based organizations are hyper relational,” he said, noting some of the pain points that stand in the way of potential partnerships, and the need for dedicated efforts such as the USAID initiative to bring these two sides together. Brinkmoeller also talked about a group he feels is often overlooked: “Faith-motivated business people doing innovation in the workplace with humanitarian impulses.” He mentioned the [GHR Foundation](#) — a Minneapolis, Minnesota-based philanthropic organization with the stated mission of working toward a just, peaceful, and healthy future — as one example of giving that grew out of faith.

“We don’t consider ourselves as a faith-based foundation, but because of our legacy and long-term partnerships, we’ve developed a comfort and competency working with faith-based groups, and that has allowed us to get deeper links within communities and directly with people,” Amy Rauenhorst Goldman, CEO and chair of the foundation, told Devex. “In most of the world, faith is a key component of someone’s identity, either an individual or a community, and it’s what fuels conflict around the world and what fuels hope and development as well.”

She said that through partnerships such as USAID’s Central African Republic initiative, to which GHR Foundation is a donor, the goal is not only to have a direct impact but also to generate more evidence around the power of partnering with faith-based organizations.

“When I think of innovation, I am always thinking about a new and better way to do something. I often think of innovation as building: new systems, new platforms. And I do think it’s very curious why all faith-based groups get lumped in this category of not being innovative.” She said there is a resistance to and dismissal of partnering with faith-based groups among many global development organizations, which stands in the way of progress.

## Doing good better

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While there may be more evidence needed, the anecdotal examples of faith-based organizations pursuing innovation continue to grow.

After the 2014 war in Gaza, building materials such as concrete and steel were restricted from entry, and the de facto government did not allow humanitarian agencies to distribute tents, so CRS designed an all-timber transitional shelter to re-house families.

“In our context, innovation means constantly striving to do better for the people we serve. It means identifying and building on local capacities and strengths. It means working within a complex set of limitations — political, environmental, geographical, technological — to come up with creative solutions that work despite the restrictions,” Hilary DuBose, country representative for the Palestinian Territory for CRS, told Devex via email. “One of the main reasons that many great innovations come from country offices is that we frequently face context-specific restrictions that force us to come up with creative, locally initiated solutions to development and humanitarian challenges.”

The Vatican has become a convener on topics such as assisting victims of human trafficking; while the pope has pushed impact investing and, according to a session at South by Southwest in Austin, Texas, earlier this year, the church is integrating new media technology to reach its community of 1.2 billion people.

Islamic Relief, a nonprofit humanitarian agency, is among the faith-based organizations considering how technology can tap into the cultural acceptance they tend to have. Followers of the religion, or the communities they reach through their work, are a captive and receptive audience, said Shahin Ashraf, global advocacy and campaigns advisor for Islamic Relief. So the key for her organization and other FBOs, as she calls them, is figuring out how to engage these communities online as well as offline.

Faith-based groups can be at the forefront of highlighting their causes through mediums such as Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. These social media outlets have become “the most common way of mobilizing Muslim millennials in discussions around faith and breaking down misconceptions,” she said. One example of a way Islamic Relief is leveraging technology to accelerate their work is in financial technology, or FinTech, which Ashraf called “the great leveler” for Muslim female entrepreneurs who found it difficult to run their own businesses but can now access digital credit and sell their products in an online marketplace. But many challenges remain, including how this increasingly fast-paced world, in which “everything 10 minutes ago is now history,” as she put it, seems more and more remote from the Quran, the Torah, or the Bible.

With a report called “Doing Good Better,” Theos, a think tank focused on the role of religion in society, asks what can be learned from existing examples of faith-based social innovations.

“Innovation depends on having the right kind of ‘engines’ — institutions which prioritise and incubate innovation, ‘fuel’ — funding which will scale and support innovation, and ‘drivers’ — social entrepreneurs that can lead innovation,” writes Paul Bickley, director of the political program at Theos. “The social action of churches and other faith communities is much to the credit of religious groups, but putting these things in place will allow for an evolution in religious public action, ensuring that they can deepen their engagement with the communities which they already serve and work even more effectively in dealing with problems that blight people’s lives.”

## Impact at scale

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When the American Jewish World Service discusses its own work on innovation, it often focuses on a program that promotes faith-based leadership in development and human rights. The organization sees development and human rights as inextricably bound to one another, and its Global Justice Fellowship selects 14 Jewish leaders from across the U.S. to participate

in the program. Next month, American rabbis will learn from human rights advocates in Guatemala, before returning for six months of human rights education, as part of a program that is designed to expand their moral, ethical, and spiritual leadership.

“In a political climate in which acts of hatred and discrimination are on the rise, faith-based organizations have an opportunity and a challenge to serve as a force for good in the world,” said Shari Turitz, vice president for programs at AJWS. While AJWS is a Jewish organization, it does not proselytize its religious beliefs nor impose its view of development and human rights on grantees, she said, explaining that the people they support come from a wide array of religious, ethnic, and ideological backgrounds, but are united by the will to promote human rights in their communities and countries.

“The big question we don’t ask ourselves is: Are we having impact, even if we’re doing innovation?” Sonal Shah, executive director of the Beeck Center for Social Innovation and Impact at Georgetown University, told Devex.

She echoed concerns Senefeld expressed about innovations that exist only as experiments in labs, or one-off pilots, but never scale to reach their full potential.

“I think one of the things faith-based organizations bring is trust. They’ve been in communities for long periods of time. They have built a lot of trust with organizations and with people ... through good times and bad times,” Shah said.

In addition, these organizations have data spanning many decades, which they can use to inform their work, she added. “For the same reason that trust in communities is hugely positive, it also means that it takes longer to make shifts, which can pose a challenge for faith-based organizations,” she said.

Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution, is behind CycleBeads, a natural family planning tool. Victoria Jennings, a researcher at Georgetown’s Institute for Reproductive Health, wanted to find alternatives for families that would not use medical or surgical solutions, in many cases due to their faith. She developed a necklace with 32 color-coded beads, each representing a day of the menstrual cycle, to raise fertility awareness.

## Problem of perception

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In most ways, experts told Devex, operationalizing on innovation looks no different at faith-based organizations than at other NGOs, so most of the challenges with innovation come down to problems of perception.

Innovation is seen as “throwing off the shackles,” Brinkmoeller said, and when organizations are tied to long-standing institutions that “problem of perception is there.” While some faith-based organizations have emerged as powerful partners in family planning services, there are areas of concern where, based on their moral stance, changing course is not an option — with abortion being one example.



That dynamic was part of what led Suzanne Rexing, the former director of innovation at CRS, to Pathfinder, an organization focused on sexual and reproductive health. “To successfully innovate is to recognize the importance of acceptance,” she told Devex. “Issues that were not recognized problems or were not openly discussed were the most challenging.”

Acceptance exists in a continuum around issues like gender equity, she said. “Recognizing what is acceptable in one’s faith or community is the beginning of knowing how to innovate,” she continued. Sometimes it is not clear what is or is not accepted, and because the lines are not drawn or clear, it can be difficult to color outside the lines.

Sexual and reproductive health was a complicated topic at CRS, because as an agency member of the Catholic Church, “the organization heeds its position and respects its integrity,” Rexing said. She added that she believes more than one opinion or position can exist and all can achieve good.

“I think through innovation, faith-based organizations like CRS and non-faith-based organizations like Pathfinder may one day partner together,” she said. “A new kind of innovation begins with a more inclusive and generous conversation.”

Looking back at her time at CRS, Rexing said she was inspired by the way it took on the challenge to innovate at scale as part of the MacArthur Foundation’s 100&Change competition.

“CRS’s willingness to tackle the problems of deinstitutionalization of children was one of the bravest decisions. I know, because it began with its own acceptance that so many of the orphanages in the world are part of the faith community and that well-meaning philanthropy fed this global problem. CRS acceptance of the church’s role in the institutionalization of children was their catalyst to innovate,” she said.

## Taking innovation forward

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On Wednesday, the MacArthur Foundation announced the winner of 100&Change and its \$100 million grant. CRS walked away as a runner-up with \$15 million, and the need for a plan B with a smaller budget in order to pursue their vision of changing how society cares for children in orphanages.

Moving forward, CRS will continue to face challenges in operationalizing on innovation. There are preconceived notions around how they work and who they serve — for example, it comes as a surprise to many that the majority of the population that CRS serves is Muslim. There is a tendency toward humility that causes faith-based organizations to keep quiet about their work on innovation, Senefeld of CRS said. And there is the image problem, with words such as “trustworthy” ranking high, and words such as “innovative” ranking low, in a recent survey of perceptions of CRS.

Senefeld said the whole 100&Change process was transformational for CRS, because it challenged them to think big, versus project by project. As Rexing exited the organization, she advised them to continue to diffuse innovation throughout, rather than have a single position focused on it. The organization dedicates funding to facilitating innovation in its country offices and for its partners overseas, then works to bring those learnings back into the agency.

If other funders come through to support the CRS project, they will be building on a tradition of faith-based organizations coming together to take on big challenges, from polio to AIDS, from emergency response to refugee resettlement, from religious divides in the Central African Republic to child marriage in Kenya.

Secularism is growing in the United States and Europe, where younger people are less likely to identify with a religion. But in many parts of the world, religion is growing fast. One of the dynamics faith-based organizations will have to deal with is what Alan Cooperman, director of religion research at the Pew Research Center, has described as “the secularizing West and the rapidly growing rest.” Faith-based organizations based in the U.S. and Europe may face fundraising challenges in dealing with this dynamic.

One option Brinkmoeller proposed was looking to high net worth individuals who are driven by faith, working with them not just as donors but as partners, and drawing on their ideas. One organization to watch is CRS as it builds on its 100&Change experience, which Senefeld said took the organization outside of its comfort zone in a good way, and seeks new donors to support its bold solution to a big problem. Shah said that while faith-based organizations are purpose driven, because they might benefit from becoming purpose first.

“How do you find where people are and allow them a chance to come in, as opposed to telling them where to be in order to be part of a faith-based organization?” she asked. “There is a way to come at faith without being in faith.”

## About the author

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Catherine Cheney is a Senior Reporter for Devex. She covers the West Coast of the U.S., focusing on the role of technology and innovation in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. And she frequently represents Devex as a speaker and moderator. Prior to joining Devex, Catherine earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Yale University, worked as a web producer for POLITICO and reporter for World Politics Review, and helped to launch NationSwell. Catherine has reported from all over the world, and freelanced for outlets including the Atlantic and the Washington Post. She is also the West Coast ambassador for the Solutions Journalism Network, a nonprofit that trains and connect journalists to cover responses to problems.