

Doctor of Ministry Thesis, Chris Rice, Duke Divinity School 2014
Toward a Practical Theology of Institutions to Serve Faith-Based Organizations

What Drew Me to This Thesis Topic?

Through 25 years of service in both FBOs and the theological academy—from grassroots community development in Mississippi, to the Duke Divinity School Center for Reconciliation and engagements with both U.S. ministries and numerous global contexts—I have become increasingly concerned about a growing number of Christian organizations that engage their work and evaluate their effectiveness little differently from secular organizations. I was alarmed by the comment of a friend who served many years with a major Christian organization. “I think half the staff will leave in the next five years,” he said. “It has become too much about business, too little about ministry.”

Yet I have also encountered many signs of hope—FBOs that have, over decades, been marked by a specialness in how they relate to neighbor and stranger, others in their organization, and to both Scripture and policy, not to mention their communal sense of joy. These organizations are somehow grounded in, and continually surprised by, God’s agency and interruptions.

My thesis emerged out of this angst, and this hope.

Thesis Abstract

From global organizations such as World Vision and Habitat for Humanity, to national organizations such as the Call to Renewal and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, to denominational initiatives such as the United Methodist Committee on Relief and Church World Service, to local food banks and community development corporations, U.S. faith-based organizations (FBOs) founded by Christians have gained wide recognition and influence both nationally and internationally. They have become, to a large extent, the *de facto* bearers of contemporary Christian mission in an increasingly post-denominational landscape.

Yet the focus of this thesis is how FBOs suffer from a separation between missiology, ecclesiology, and theological reflection in ways that inhibit their participation in the mission of God, or *missio Dei*.

The thesis draws on history, sociology, and missiology to provide a critical framework for an interdisciplinary analysis of FBOs that illuminates the problems they face and describes what is required for a recovery of faithful witness. The thesis begins with the emergence of FBOs as a uniquely Protestant story, locating their origins within the history of Protestant missions, the emergence of the voluntary society, and their evolution into humanitarianism and the problems which emerge out of that history. A move to sociological analysis situates contemporary FBOs within a wider social ecology of powerful forces that cause non-profits to behave like for-profit corporations, often giving themselves over to bureaucratic models shaped by a technological understanding of practice. The final move to missiology and ecclesiology makes the claim that the critical reference point for evaluation of the FBO is the flourishing of the practice of Christian missions.

This constructive missiology provides the basis for proposing marks of a faithful mission-type organization in the contemporary context which can sustain the practice of missions not primarily as activism, but as participation in the *missio Dei*. The thesis re-narrates FBOs and the marks we should look for in FBOs by proposing several organizational disciplines that provide a response to the challenges facing the contemporary FBO. These marks are displayed through brief case studies from three FBOs: L’Arche International, the U.S. national organization InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and New Song Urban Ministries in Baltimore.