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The Role of the Congregation in Community Service: A Philanthropic Case Study

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Introduction

In an effort to bolster academic achievement and close the achievement gap among children in Grand Rapids, Mich., the Douglas and Maria DeVos Family Foundation organized and funded a collaborative, church-based effort called the Gatherings of Hope Initiative (GHI).[1] The initiative aims to increase the quality and quantity of collaborative community outreach and service efforts by inner-city African-American and Latino congregations. It includes a variety of components, including continuing education for clergy, grants for family educational and recreational programs, and developmental support for program design, grant writing, communications, and technology. This article concerns one component of GHI: the Family Leadership Initiative (FLI), a multichurch effort to strengthen families and educate children.

The FLI began in spring 2011 with "congregational learning teams," composed of clergy and volunteers from two cohorts of 20 congregations each. The teams met at the foundation's facilities and were tasked with designing the program in a grassroots manner. Both clergy and congregants – parents and youth – from the participating churches were invited to play an active role in designing the program. By offering the congregations a stake in the design,

Key Points

- The Family Leadership Initiative (FLI), part of the larger Gatherings of Hope Initiative, was a collaboratively designed program to strengthen families and improve children's education in Grand Rapids, Mich.

- FLI was launched in 2011 with two cohorts of 20 congregations who took part in a six-step design process.

- Programs were implemented in fall 2011. The program entailed holding monthly meetings for parents and children that included bonding time, parent education and homework support for students, and time for ministry.

- The initial evaluation shows high levels of satisfaction, with students reporting some academic improvements.

- For the congregations, FLI provided a rare opportunity to collaborate with each other.

the foundation hoped that the churches would have a stronger sense of ownership during the subsequent implementation. Ultimately, the FLI sought to equip congregations to be more interested in and adept at supporting families and students academically.

The impetus for the FLI was poor academic performance in Grand Rapids. The city's school system has been losing students, closing buildings, and producing some discouraging

[1] See gatheringsofhope.org. Gatherings of Hope is an explicitly religious, church-focused sister initiative to the neighborhood-based Believe 2 Become Initiative. (See ibelieveibecome.org.)

numbers: a 52 percent graduation rate and only 49 percent of seventh-graders reading at grade level (Grand Rapids Public Schools, 2009). Moreover, a 2012 study found that only 8 percent of juniors in Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) taking the ACT college entrance exam were deemed "college ready" (French, 2012).

> *Congregations desire to be autonomous and independent. Such a proclivity for self-sufficiency and sovereignty inhibits the ability of churches to pool resources, network, or collaborate on efforts and projects that would benefit their larger respective communities.*

The reasons for these disappointing results are myriad and complex. Although GRPS may seem an easy scapegoat to some, closer examination reveals the school system to be a victim of much broader socioeconomic phenomena. In an effort to bolster academic achievement among Grand Rapids' children without casting blame, the foundation implemented the FLI in 2011 in an effort to harness the latent potential of congregations to support students and their families.[2] With the direct leadership of program officer Khary Bridgewater and the supportive leadership of senior program officer Edwin Hernández, the foundation invited clergy and lay people from 40 congregations to participate in the design and implementation of a program that would seek to enhance the academic

performance of students from their respective churches and neighborhoods. With their support, congregations received an invitation to apply for $5,000 grants to facilitate implementation of the pilot program at their churches during the fall semester of 2011.[3] To summarize, the foundation sought to use the grant money and pilot program in order to mobilize, equip, and support religious congregations to engage with their communities and take an active role in educating children to be ready for school, work, and life.

Literature Review

In the disciplinary field of congregational studies, a consistently dominant theme has been that of "de facto congregationalism" (Warner, 1994). That is, the bent of churches in the United States tends to be toward isolation. Such a phenomenon dovetails with declining denominationalism. In short, congregations desire to be autonomous and independent. Such a proclivity for self-sufficiency and sovereignty inhibits the ability of churches to pool resources, network, or collaborate on efforts and projects that would benefit their larger respective communities.

In his ethnographic study of the Four Corners neighborhood of Boston, Omar McRoberts (2003, p. 135) persuasively demonstrated how congregations consistently failed to build "collective agential capacities in neighborhoods." That is not to say that churches fail to develop networks; they do. However, the networks tend to be internal and insular. And because churches have grown more mobile and particularistic in their membership, they have less attachment to neighborhoods and, thus, less interest in developing place-based institutional infrastructure. The vertical networks of these congregations have a propensity to inhibit collaborative relationships with neighboring churches and agencies. In sum, the latent social power of churches remains largely dormant, untapped, and impotent when it comes to addressing critical social issues.

Though they tend not to coordinate their efforts, it should be noted that congregations provide

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[2] The new program referenced here is designed to support and enhance the pre-existing Believe 2 Become Initiative (B2B). B2B is a place-based initiative that created four contiguous "Hope Zones," targeted neighborhoods composed of the attendance areas for nine low-performing public elementary schools. The majority of the congregations involved in FLI are located in these Hope Zones. For more, see Carlson et al., 2011.

[3] Thirty-two churches actually received the $5,000 grants.

high levels of social service. In numerous publications, Ram Cnaan has found that churches function as community hubs and essential components of civil society. In fact, Cnaan (2006) discovered in a study of churches in Philadelphia that of the 1,400 congregations considered, almost every faith community exhibited some type of manifest caring for others.

Similar to Cnaan, Nancy Ammerman (2005) describes congregations as tremendously effective generators of social capital. In a bit of a riposte to Robert Putnam's conclusions in *Bowling Alone* (2001) (that social capital and community were in precipitous decline in the U.S.), Ammerman argues that he should have been observing congregations instead of bowling lanes. There, within the faith communities, Putnam would have discovered social capital, bonds of community, and provisions of both human and material resources.

In an echo of Cnaan and Ammerman, a 2007 study of Kent County, Mich., (including Grand Rapids, the site of FLI), "Gatherings of Hope: How Religious Congregations Contribute to the Quality of Life in Kent County," revealed that local congregations generated between $95 million and $118 million annually in in-kind community-serving ministries (Hernández, Carlson, Medeiros-Ward, Stek, & Verspoor, 2008).[4] However, the study also discovered that the majority of congregational leaders did not associate with pastoral networks and that there was a lack of connectivity among the congregations.

The bulk of the evidence, then, indicates that the norm for U.S. congregations includes high levels of social-service provision, but little collaborating with other congregations. Such a milieu allows for redundancies, inefficiencies, and injurious competition. Within that tension of highly socially engaged yet isolated congregations, the Douglas and Maria DeVos Family Foundation offered the Family Leadership Initiative. The FLI sought to address the tendency toward isolation by fostering new and creative relationships

[4] Funded by the DeVos Family Foundation.

between congregations that will efficiently and sustainably benefit both the congregations and the community by supporting the educational lives of children and strengthening family life in general.

> *It is well understood that congregations serve as "anchor institutions" (Franklin, 2007) in minority communities by supporting civic vitality and healthy social discourse. Congregations also provide a key functional role in communities by providing places of refuge, service, convening, and, most importantly, vehicles to transmit personal and social values.*

The Role of the Foundation

In part, the FLI functions as a logical extension of "Gatherings of Hope," the aforementioned study funded by the foundation. In that report, the foundation expressed a key goal to "build the capacity of both large and small religious congregations to take greater action and become actively involved in solutions that matter" (Hernández et al., 2008, p. vi). Beyond that, the foundation used the report to better understand how congregations serve families and children in their respective communities. It is well understood that congregations serve as "anchor institutions" (Franklin, 2007) in minority communities by supporting civic vitality and healthy social discourse. Congregations also provide a key functional role in communities by providing places of refuge, service, convening, and, most importantly, as vehicles to transmit personal and social values.

The choice of the foundation to invest in strengthening local congregations reflects the best practices of social-influence theory as well as historically tested methods of past generations to affect culture. It is hard to overstate the role congregations have played in the social life of the U.S. Their impact has ranged from advancing literacy through the Sunday School movement to the launching of the abolition and civil rights movements. The decision to engage local congregations with their innate transformative capacity has the potential to significantly expand the foundation's ability to achieve the goal of seeing all 18-year-olds in Grand Rapids ready for college, work, and life.

According to the "Gatherings of Hope" report, 92 percent of Kent County religious leaders expressed interest in engaging in brand-based[5] efforts to improve community well-being (Hernández et al., 2008, p. 33). The fact that 79 percent of congregation services are delivered to nonmembers and that 65 percent of this work is delivered to children (Hernández et al., 2008, pp. 63-64) indicates that congregations are significantly investing in the lives of community children. It is clear that churches are not only willing and able to contribute significantly to the social good, but they have been contributing faithfully, leveraging millions of dollars worth of volunteer time and donated resources.

With that in mind, the foundation has spent considerable effort cultivating relationships with local congregations. In an effort to build trust, they established a pastoral advisory board. The foundation also convened a number of clergy leadership groups: African American pastors, Latino non-Catholics, and Latino Catholics. In addition, one program officer alone visited individually with more than 80 pastors. Because of these relationships, the foundation garnered a lot of interest from congregations when it began approaching them with an idea about supporting the education of children and strengthening families.

The Family Leadership Initiative

In an effort to harness those capacities of congregations in a more collaborative manner to address local educational distress, the foundation recruited two cohorts of 20 congregations each to participate in the design and implementation of a pilot program through the congregational learning teams.[6] A member of the clergy, an adult leader, and a youth represented the churches at three separate program-design meetings. Each cohort had a total of six meetings – clergy met on three consecutive Tuesday mornings, while adults and children met on three consecutive Thursday evenings (the meetings were separate primarily due to availability conflicts between clergy, more available during the day, and working laypeople, more available in the evenings).[7] For incentives, each pastor received an Apple iPad tablet that would also serve as a networking, information-gathering, and ministerial tool, while lay adults and children received $20 for every meeting that they attended. Another reason for providing iPads to pastors was the foundation's interest in developing congregations' capacity to use technology effectively. To that end, the foundation also created a Gatherings of Hope website that was envisioned as an interactive clearinghouse for congregations participating in the FLI. The foundation used the site to post dates for upcoming events, important documents, and other vital information. In addition, the congregations were invited to post videos related to the FLI and to add their own church's events to a communal calendar on the website.

During the program design, Cohort 1 (of the congregational learning teams mentioned previously) was tasked with identifying the problems and sketching rough ideas about how congregations might best use their resources to improve education in Grand Rapids. In the following three weeks of meetings, Cohort

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[5] By "brand based," we mean a communitywide collaborative effort that functions under a widely recognized umbrella name and logo.

[6] Out of original 40 participating congregational learning teams, 20 were African American, 16 were Latino, and four were multicultural. The congregations varied in size, as 16 of the churches had fewer than 100 members, 12 churches had 100 to 300, four churches had 300 to 500, and the remaining eight churches had more than 500 members.

[7] This model of having clergy meet separately from adult/youth representatives was well received by participants and used again during the 2012 redesign process of FLI.

2 modified and refined the plans established by Cohort 1.[8] The two cohorts then met for a combined celebration meal at which the foundation presented back to them the synthesized pilot program that they had jointly engineered during the previous six weeks.

The program-design meetings lasted roughly two and a half hours. Each began with prayer and a meal. In order to foster more intimacy, facilitator and co-author Bridgewater engaged the participants in "ice-breaker" activities.

Participants frequently engaged in small-group brainstorming sessions, the details of which they later reported back to the larger assembly. Bridgewater would then review the recordings of the sessions and report a summary of the previous week's work at the next meeting to ensure that his encapsulation remained accurate.

Participants responded to prompts such as: How do we help children and families improve academic performance? How do we lead change? How can you use your influence to ensure the success of the project? How does your church currently engage "the system" of education in your community? What attitudes, values, and behaviors need to change? The clergy, in particular, had to consider what they would give up in their ministries and personal lives to make room for implementing the pilot program.

The program-design process included an educational component as well. Participants learned about the education crisis at both the local and national level. The foundation also explained the significance of the "5 Vital Behaviors" (Carlson et al., 2011):

1. Daily affirmation: Children who are regularly affirmed and held to higher academic expectations do better that those who aren't.
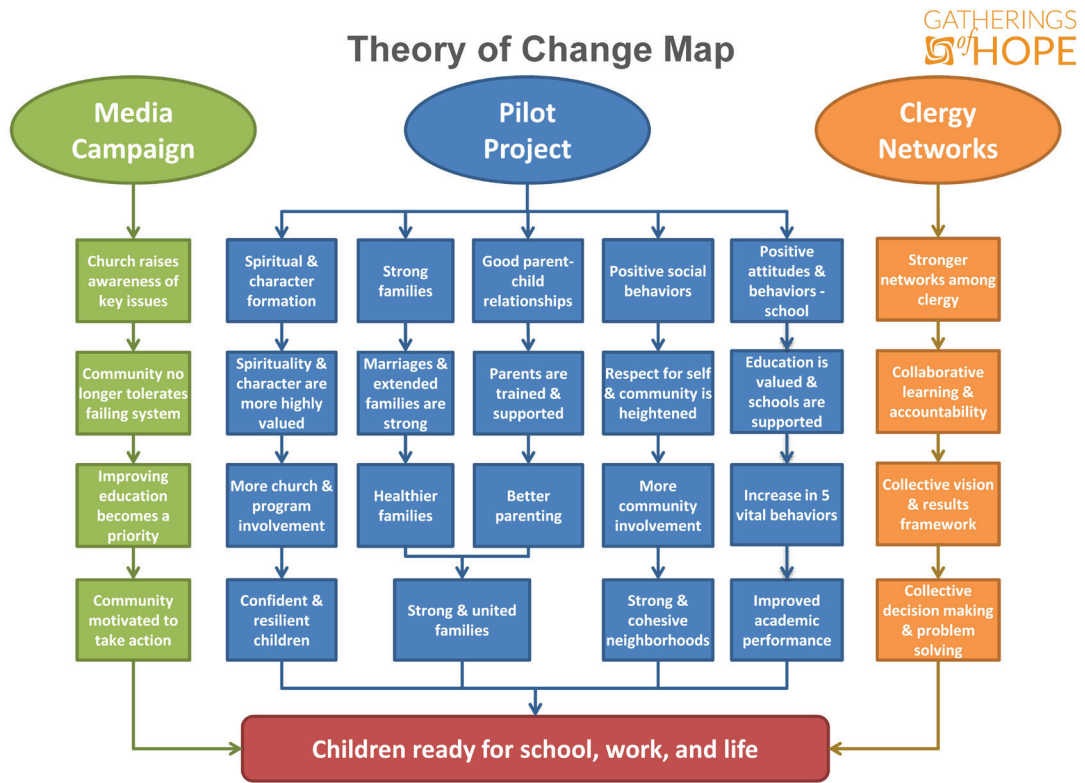
2. Daily attendance: Children are more likely to keep up with daily lessons and assignments if they attend school regularly.

3. Check schoolwork: Discuss what is being taught in school every day and support the completion of homework.

4. Get help: Monitor school progress closely and contact the school when a child has difficulty.

5. Read together: Studies show that children who read books at home for just 20 minutes a day do better in school.

In sum, the program officers at the foundation structured the program design to include the following six-step process:

1. Identification of the problem or issue: Children and families need help improving academic outcomes.

2. Identification of the communities' needs and assets. Needs: tutoring, parental training, mentoring, and spiritual direction. Assets: facilities, leadership, volunteers, and educators. Integral to this process was highlighting the ways in which congregational assets could be mobilized as community assets.

3. Naming the desired results of the program: confident and resilient children; strong, united families; strong, cohesive neighborhoods; and improved academic performance.

4. Identification of the factors influential to the success of the program: racism, culture regarding education, incarcerated parents, legal status, employment, language barriers, single parenting, church programming, existing resources, peer networks, and family structures.

5. Identification of the strategies utilized in the program: family bonding time, family communication, family values, parental training, parental academic support, parental self-care, character development in children, improvement of children's study skills, homework

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[8] Using a logic model process, Cohort 1 was asked "what do we want to do differently?" The cohort then designed a theory of change. Cohort 2 was then asked "how do we want to do things differently?" In essence, Cohort 2 used Cohort 1's theory of change as a guide while developing specific features of the pilot program.

FIGURE 1 Theory of Change Map

Theory of Change Map

GATHERINGS of HOPE

Media Campaign	Pilot Project					Clergy Networks
Church raises awareness of key issues	Spiritual & character formation	Strong families	Good parent-child relationships	Positive social behaviors	Positive attitudes & behaviors - school	Stronger networks among clergy
Community no longer tolerates failing system	Spirituality & character are more highly valued	Marriages & extended families are strong	Parents are trained & supported	Respect for self & community is heightened	Education is valued & schools are supported	Collaborative learning & accountability
Improving education becomes a priority	More church & program involvement	Healthier families	Better parenting	More community involvement	Increase in 5 vital behaviors	Collective vision & results framework
Community motivated to take action	Confident & resilient children	Strong & united families		Strong & cohesive neighborhoods	Improved academic performance	Collective decision making & problem solving

Children ready for school, work, and life

support, mentoring, and training both parents and children for higher levels of involvement in ministry.

6. Identification of the assumptions regarding the implementation of the pilot program: four weeks of training for leaders and assistants, recruitment of 10 families[9] per congregation to be involved, incentives for familial involvement, celebrations related to the program, certificates to acknowledge participation, and involvement in evaluation of the program.

Through this six-step process (and under the guidance of the foundation's program officers), the two cohorts devised a theory of change map. (For more details, see Figure 1.) The map delineates how the two cohorts envisioned the

pilot project ultimately reaching the goal of making participating youth "ready for school, work, and life."

At the celebration dinner, the foundation presented the synthesis of the two cohorts' efforts: a two-and-a-half-hour, 10- to 12-meeting pilot program that each of the congregations would implement during the fall semester. The template for the program meetings included the following primary activities:

•   One hour of family bonding that would include a meal and activities that centered on bonding, reinforcing values, and communication.

•   A second hour in which children would have time to be mentored, receive homework support, and be trained in character development. The homework support centered on math, which was chosen for practical reasons based on available resources and ease of implementa-

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[9] It should also be noted that half of the 10 families were expected not to be associated with the congregation. In that respect, the foundation encouraged the congregations to use the program as an outreach opportunity.

tion. The foundation provided three optional tools for conducting the math support sessions: math games, practice math sheets, or Khan Academy (a highly engaging, free, online math software program). During this same hour, the parents would gather for parent-training classes and discussion.

• The evening closed with a half-hour of ministry time. Typically, this would include reflections about what had been learned or accomplished during the preceding two hours, prayer, and occasional singing. In its ideal form, both adults and children would lead this last component.

With the basic program design in place, the foundation used the remaining months before the fall semester for training leaders from each participating congregation and reviewing applications for the grant funding. In order to facilitate the application process, the foundation provided a budget template.[10] Upon acceptance of the grant application, the foundation distributed funds directly to the churches. The majority of congregations then began their pilot programs in September.

Evaluation

The effort to assess the program design and implementation, led by evaluators from the Center for Social Research (CSR) at Calvin College, included data gathered from registration forms, surveys, and qualitative methodology.[11] With consultation from the program officers at the foundation and the Institutional Review Board at Calvin College, the evaluation team crafted an evaluation framework that employed mixed methods and data collection throughout the design and implementation of the FLI. The questions guiding the evaluation were as follows:

1. Participation results: Is the FLI increasing congregational engagement in educating children?

   • Informal engagement: Is there evidence that congregational culture is shifting toward engagement?
   • Formal engagement: Are there new congregational projects, programs and other identifiable, organized efforts to educate kids directly or mobilize educational efforts by parents, volunteers and schools?

2. Academic and behavioral results: Are participating congregations' efforts producing observable – even measurable – educational results?

   • Vital behaviors (intermediate outcomes): Do members of participating congregations report increasing engagement over time in the five Believe to Become (B2B) vital behaviors? Is attendance improving? Are parents more engaged with schools?
   • Academic success (long-term outcomes): Does available evidence suggest that the Initiative is improving parent-student communication, parent-school relations, test scores, matriculation rates, and other observable indicators?

3. Internal sustainability: Is the project appropriately structured? Are the project staff well-equipped and well-supported? Are the foundation's expectations for its own involvement aligned with the expectations of participants and the trajectory of partnerships?

4. External sustainability: Is the initiative moving toward capacity for long-term self-support and self-determination? Do congregational stakeholders (clergy, leaders, members, students, key donors) have a growing sense ownership of and responsibility for the initiative, its values, and the local community? For example, is the initiative creating a stronger stake for participants? What effect is the initiative having on the internal religious, political, and social dynamics of the participating

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[10] As might be expected, the congregations designed highly variable budgets. A few of the more typical line items included honorariums for leaders, incentives (cash or gifts cards) to reward consistent attendance, caterers and food, and computer infrastructure.

[11] CSR is an independent center that utilizes faculty, staff, and college students in applied, community-based scholarly projects. Established in 1970, CSR engages in collaborative research that supports both the social science faculty at Calvin College and the broader community.

congregations? Are clergy becoming more or less collaborative with members? Is internal conflict increasing or decreasing? What is the direction of the relationship between the foundation as an institution and individual foundation staff on one hand, and the initiative participants as a movement and as individuals on the other hand? Are the long-term dynamics positive for all concerned? Is the congregational network being encouraged and given incentives to develop its own governance and self-determination?

Registration forms collected by the congregations and submitted to the evaluation team suggest that the program was very successful in touching a large number of people in the intended population. Of particular note was the degree of outreach achieved: Only 50 percent of the families said that they had previously been "very involved" with the congregation sponsoring their FLI program; the rest were "somewhat involved" (21 percent), had no prior involvement (15 percent), or did not answer (13 percent).

Quantitative Data
Findings From Registration Forms

Registration forms collected by the congregations and submitted to the evaluation team suggest that the program was very successful in touching

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The following statistics were also calculated from the registration forms:

1. The total number of individuals registered was 1,084 (442 adults, 642 youths).

2. A total of 290 families participated in the program (approximately 10 families per site, which had been set as the recruiting goal during the program-design process).

3. Adult women were over-represented (64 percent of adult registrants identified themselves as female).

4. The over-representation of adult women was primarily due to the participation of single-parent families (among one-parent families, 64 percent of those parents described their marital status as "single").

5. A substantial number of families listed Spanish as their primary household language (English as primary household language: 61 percent; Spanish or other (bilingual): 36 percent).

6. Thirty percent of registered families live within the B2B Hope Zones. All but three of the churches registered at least one family living within the Hope Zones.

7. Forty percent of families reported being aware of the B2B initiative prior to this program. Eleven percent of families reported that at least one of their children had previously participated in a B2B program.

8. Fifty percent of the families identified the minister or other staff at their church as
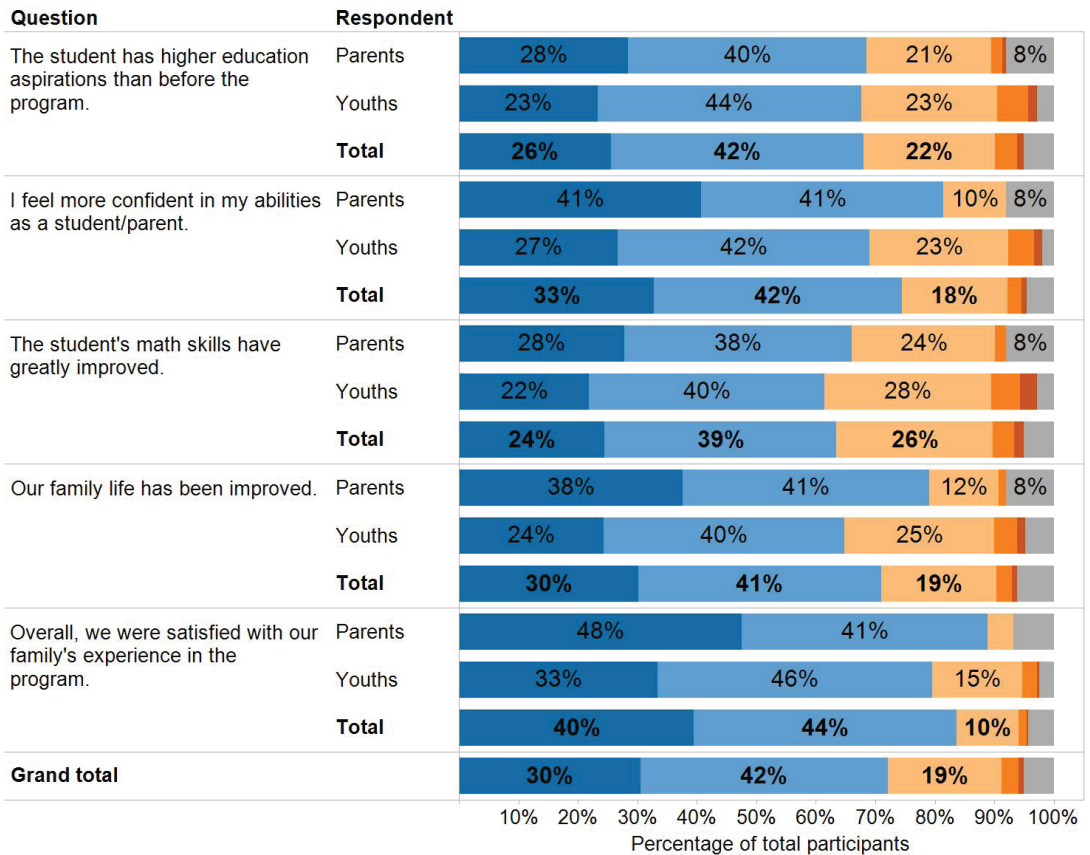
FIGURE 2 Parent and Youth Evaluation of Program Impact

Parent and Youth Evaluation of Program Impact

Question	Respondent				
The student has higher education aspirations than before the program.	Parents	28%	40%	21%	8%
	Youths	23%	44%	23%	
	Total	**26%**	**42%**	**22%**	
I feel more confident in my abilities as a student/parent.	Parents	41%	41%	10% 8%	
	Youths	27%	42%	23%	
	Total	**33%**	**42%**	**18%**	
The student's math skills have greatly improved.	Parents	28%	38%	24%	8%
	Youths	22%	40%	28%	
	Total	**24%**	**39%**	**26%**	
Our family life has been improved.	Parents	38%	41%	12%	8%
	Youths	24%	40%	25%	
	Total	**30%**	**41%**	**19%**	
Overall, we were satisfied with our family's experience in the program.	Parents	48%	41%		
	Youths	33%	46%	15%	
	Total	**40%**	**44%**	**10%**	
Grand total		**30%**	**42%**	**19%**	

10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
Percentage of total participants

Legend
- ■ No answer
- ■ Strongly disagree
- ■ Disagree
- ■ Neutral
- ■ Agree
- ■ Strongly agree

the source of how they heard about the FLI program; another 25 percent identified other church members when asked how they heard about the program.

9. Sixty-one percent of the families reported having a computer with Internet access available in their homes; 37 percent reported no home computer or Internet access.

10. The proportion of youths confirmed as attending a GRPS school was 39 percent,

which was just under half of the responses. Forty-one percent reported being non-GRPS; another 20 percent did not respond to the question.

Findings From Survey Responses
Survey instruments developed by the evaluation team and administered by the sites as the programs were coming to an end indicated high levels of satisfaction with the program among parents, youths, and staff. The survey results indicate positive impacts in all of the key areas

specified at the outset of the program, such as quality of family life, youth math abilities, and parental confidence.

> *One of the co-leaders discussed how volunteering was becoming a new, substantive part of the congregational culture.*

1. Sixty-four percent of the staffers surveyed were female. This mirrors the over-representation of females among participants.

2. One third of the staffers were volunteers. Approximately half were either co-leaders or coaches; 14 percent were clergy.

3. Staff and volunteers were most likely to report having worked between two and four hours per week, but several reported working 30 or more hours weekly to realize the program. If we include nonresponding staff and volunteers, total time investment likely exceeded 1,000 hours weekly.

4. Overall satisfaction among participants was very high: 84% of participants agreed that they were satisfied with their family's experience in the program. (For more details, see Figure 2, which shows how both parents and youths responded to a set of basic program impact questions.) Evaluations were highly positive in general; in response to each of the prompts, more than 50 percent of participants reported either agreement or strong agreement. The average overall level of positive responses was 72 percent. Parents tended to report slightly greater benefits than did youths; 89 percent of parents indicated overall satisfaction with the program, compared to 79 percent of youths who indicated the same.

5. Ninety-six percent of parents rated the overall

quality of their program as being either good, very good, or excellent; 84 percent of youths responded likewise.

6. Seventy-one percent of participants agreed that their family life had been improved.

7. The majority of youths (62 percent) agreed that they had greatly improved their math skills.

8. Eighty-two percent of parents agreed that they now feel more confident in their parenting abilities.

9. Seventy-nine percent of the staff described themselves as being satisfied with the quality of the program design.

10. Half of all surveyed families reported having used a computer to access things like Khan Academy or the Gatherings of Hope website at some point during the program.

11. Less than half of the participants reported having perfect attendance of the program. Sickness, parent(s) having to work, family matters, and lack of transportation were most often cited as reasons for missing having missed program events.

Qualitative Data[12]

The key themes explained in this section represent an analysis of participant observation field notes from eight site visits, semi-structured interviews with participants from eight congregations, two focus groups (clergy in one focus group and lay adults and children in the other), and "World Café"[13] documents from an FLI debriefing that occurred in January 2012 at New Hope Baptist Church. Based simply on the responses of participants, the first year of the FLI was a measured success about which there was

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[12] For more on the qualitative data collection and analysis, see methodological appendix.
[13] Participants met around tables and were given prompt questions ("What went well?" "What were some challenges?"). At every table, a designated clerk wrote notes about the discussion. The evaluation team included these documents in the assessment.

palpable excitement. As would be expected with any pilot program, however, there were numerous concerns and lessons learned that should be addressed to further refine and enhance the FLI program.

Positive Aspects to Build On

Legacy of volunteer support. The notes from the World Café frequently indicated an excitement that volunteer networks had been established through the program. During an interview, one of the co-leaders discussed how volunteering was becoming a new, substantive part of the congregational culture:

> The people from the church that were helping in the kitchen, they were replacing themselves when they couldn't be here. They were calling other people from the church and saying, "Look, I can't be here this night and they really need somebody to do this, can you do it?" Which was really cool.

Khan Academy. Congregations expressed a great deal of gratitude for the exposure to Khan Academy. A note from the World Café indicated that "Khan Academy went very well!" Interviews with participants also revealed enthusiasm for Khan Academy:

> I'm hoping that because they're starting to learn something more one-on-one and having the Khan Academy, I think that they will start to do better, so, that's my hope for them.

Notes from the World Café also indicated that at least some of the participating families had recently experienced positive parent-teacher conferences about previously struggling students; they attributed the gains at least partially to the FLI and Khan Academy.

Enthusiasm. All levels of the data suggest satisfaction with the FLI. Congregations were, by and large, pleased (and, in some cases, flattered) to be involved. The following quote typified the responses:

> I didn't hear people saying …"I would never do this again" … or "This is more than I had bargained for." I

didn't hear any of that. I heard people saying, "Wow, this is really good."

Numerous notes from the World Café also indicated that both parents and children looked forward to FLI programming. In fact, numerous participants told stories about how participants often didn't want to leave at the end of a session.

Collaboration and networking. Participants expressed gratitude for the intercongregational relationships that were nurtured through the process:

> I enjoyed the opportunity to get to know other pastors. … There's [a] ministerial alliance of African American pastors that [white pastors are] not allowed to be a part of and … it gave me an opportunity to …[get] to know [another pastor]. You know; how else was would I get to know [that pastor]? … Actually, I went to his church [to visit].

Other participants indicated that implementation forged closer ties with a neighboring congregation:

> The networking with [another church]… one of their members is helping us coach and then another family, … they come to our church, but they have their own church, too, and they are … being mentors too, or coaches. So that's networking.

> *In some cases, more resource-rich congregations supported other churches.*

In some cases, more resource-rich congregations supported other churches. The following quote notes that one FLI church benefited from a long-term relationship with a neighboring church that reserved space for their work, even when that might be reducing rental revenues:

> I would say that [a neighboring church] letting us use the building all the time is a big resource because they rent the church out and … sometimes they can't let us use the church because they've had something planned for like a year, like a wedding. But, you know, them not … renting it out to somebody else. I don't know if they've done that, like, said, "Sorry, we can't, we're not available that week because [they have a commitment to our church]".

It is difficult to overestimate how significant the genesis of these congregational relationships might be in the coming years. However, evidence of collaboration and networking remains somewhat mixed. The following quote indicates some degree of isolation: "I'd really like to know what other churches are doing for follow-up. Do you know? Have you heard anything?" Beyond that, some respondents, when asked about networking, did not contemplate the question as addressing intercongregational relationships. Instead, they interpreted it related to intra-congregational dynamics:

> I kind of networked within our church, just in case we couldn't have the meeting here, or the session here, to have an Option B to meet. That's kind of another way to network with our churches.

Increased networking and collaboration among participating congregations may be among the most significant outcome of the FLI. However, assessing significance and longevity will demand close scrutiny in the future.

Concerns and Lessons Learned

Attendance and retention. Recruiting families, getting commitments, and having people arrive in a timely fashion for the programming proved to be one of the most frustrating aspects of FLI for the participants we interviewed. Notes from the World Café exercise indicated that scheduling of after-school programming and work commitments for single parents inhibited consistent participation. Related to that, some sites had highly variable attendance numbers from week to week, which proved to be a logistical difficulty (especially in terms of food planning and preparation). For example, on the night of a site

visit from the evaluation team, one congregation had 10 children and one parent participating.

Language complications. For many of the Latino congregations, not having materials in Spanish proved to be quite frustrating and meant constrained implementation of the program. In some cases Spanish versions of program materials were delayed, in other cases the materials were never provided and sites were forced to translate English documents into Spanish on their own.

Technology issues. Varying degrees of access and utilization proved to be problematic:

- Access gaps: Notes from the World Café revealed concern that some families fell out of communication loops and the curriculum because they had limited or no access to mail addresses or home computers. In addition, some congregations had difficulty fully implementing Khan Academy because of technology resource issues: "We didn't have a strong enough Internet signal for wireless and we had troubles with it all the way through."

- Underutilization: Though most of the pastors responded extremely positively to receiving iPads from the foundation, they often had difficulty articulating exactly how the technology affected their respective ministries in a meaningful way. The following quote is instructive: "Has it affected my ministry? I use it. I don't know if it affected my ministry. I intended to use it." Said another pastor: "I went to the meeting that they had to use it better, but most of it was too simple and the rest was way too complicated for me." It may be the case that certain clergy lack the training and access to Wi-Fi connections necessary to harness the potential of both the iPads and the Gatherings of Hope website.

Compliance. In the course of evaluation, it became clear to us that not all the congregations incorporated the protocols outlined by the foundation into the pilot program. The reasons for noncompliance were varied and ranged from capacity issues (transportation, technology, kitchen facilities) to the uniqueness

of congregational subculture to variable levels of competency in adapting curriculum. However, the evaluation team was not alone in noticing this issue. One pastor remarked:

> I was talking to another pastor that's doing the program as well, and he really kind of made me a little upset. … I said, "Well, how's your program going? You know, I just wanted to know how your program went." "Oh, it's going all right, well, we're getting ready to have one program … and what we're going to do, we're going to have one a month." And I said, "One a month?" That's … eleven … [in] a whole year. … And then he said, "We're going to do it after church on a Sunday." And it just seemed like … I mean, what's going on there? And it, really, it bothered my spirit.

Capacity. Not all congregations had the same level of structural support. Some struggled to find enough volunteers. Some indicated that they could have used more training. One pastor noted trepidation about how they implemented the program:

> I thought we were going to get more of, like, a training, and when we went to the training sessions or whatever … it was more like, encouraging, you know: you can do it, and this is the outcome if you get to the end or is what could possibly happen.

Other participants noted that they could not find competent tutors for the children. Beyond that, food preparation during sites visits seemed especially taxing. Many of the congregations chose to save money by disregarding the advice to hire caterers. That necessitated teams of volunteers for cooking, serving, and cleaning up. In addition, not all of the congregations had facilities capable of handling all the aspects of the program. One co-leader discussed the limits of her church's facilities:

> We weren't really equipped to cook and feed: We could feed 20 to 60 people because we have dinners, but usually it's potlucks or catered meals. So cooking the dinners … we weren't prepared really for that and the kitchen wasn't set up for that, so that if we did that on an ongoing basis, that would be hard to sustain that as it is now.

It may be constructive to monitor the long-term viability of these work-intensive arrangements, especially for the smaller congregations, and the discrepancies in congregational facilities. Beyond that, not all participating congregations had the capacity to successfully manage the finances of the pilot project. For some, the financial aspect of the FLI proved especially daunting.

Redundancy versus the "grassroots" nature of design. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed concern that the structure of the pilot program had largely been decided before the convening of the congregational learning teams:

> I got the impression that [they] had a pretty good idea of what they were going to do and they wanted our input, … but there was a little overstatement – like ours was going to make a big difference. I think the structure was pretty well there.

Beyond that, some participants questioned whether the pilot program offered anything new or inventive. One pastor indicated that he thought similar programs had covered comparable territory:

> Seeing what Khary and the DeVos Foundation were doing …, I saw some duplication, to tell you the truth. And I remember asking … why they don't just join forces to help support the community in that sense.

This pastor's concern seems to indicate that it might be more efficient to consider how to support existing best practices.

Sustainability. Participants frequently expressed concern about how to maintain any momentum or traction that was gained during the fall 2011 pilot program. The following conversation between two program leaders typifies this concern:

> *Leader 1: And the thing that I am really uncomfortable talking about is, "And now what?" That is what I think is the biggest challenge that we have.*
>
> *Leader 2: I don't understand why you're uncomfortable with that.*

Leader 1: Well, because of the way the program was designed, with such intensive input for such a very specific period of time and then it suddenly stops.

Leader 2: But we have an idea already.

Leader 1: Oh yeah, we have ideas; we have lots of ideas and lots of energy and lots of good relationship[s]. We have lots to build on. But the program doesn't have anything built into it. It all depends on [the participating churches] to keep working with these, however many, 400 families. And that's … a really big uncertainty.

There was and is a palpable sense that there is momentum to be capitalized upon and disquiet about how to sustain gains made in fall 2011.

> *Perhaps one of the most intriguing themes to emerge had to do with the sense that congregations had their appetites whetted for similar missions related to education.*

Outcomes

The foundation articulated the three following anticipated outcomes at the outset of the FLI: churches acting as supports for strong families, churches participating in the broader community of academic support, and parents and students as leaders. The semi-structured interview schedules intentionally avoided questions that directly addressed these outcomes in the hope that the themes would manifest more organically as participants reflected on their respective experiences. In the points that follow, we see that, indeed, all three outcomes can be discerned in the interviews with participants.

Churches as Strong Supports for Families

A dominant theme that emerged from all modes of data was that the FLI program had been integral in nurturing family relationships and communication. Some visited sites even made it compulsory for families to sit together for the meal at their own individual table. One co-leader engaged in her own "ad-hoc-evaluation" and discovered that the program had catalyzed parent-child discussions: "I asked the parents …, 'What are you getting out of the program?' And they said, 'Communication with my children.'" Another co-leader discussed the fact that programming also allowed parents to think about the things they needed to do for themselves to ensure that they could suitably fulfill their roles as parents:

> I do the session with teaching the adults, so I get a lot of feedback from the adults … [W]e do have a couple families that are single-parent families with five or six children, so this is a great need for them because they're learning communication with their children … and incorporate that into getting everything done that they need to do with the children after coming home from work.

Churches Participating in Broader Community of Academic Support

Perhaps one of the most intriguing themes to emerge had to do with the sense that congregations had their appetites whetted for similar missions related to education. Below, two participants mention a "cultural shift" within their respective congregations:

> One of the kitchen ladies …, for two weeks in a row, had plans to go on vacation and they had company coming over and it was already planned, and she was … apologizing all over the place that she can't be here; and I'm, like, "It's okay." … I've been here for three years and … I'm feeling a shift.

> There isn't the big, strong expectation that people will make [church] programs a priority, but I think we may be at a place where we're starting to identify this is a culture shift that we need to make and I think that people – I don't want to be too excited about this – but I think that people are seeing what could be in the community.

Another participant noted that because of her congregation's participation in the FLI they had a new confidence to pursue other comparable programming:

> We can do it, even without the money. Food is not that expensive. We can do potlucks instead, and not give a stipend for co-leaders, as that's our ministry; we can do it as volunteers.

In short, it seems plausible to assert that FLI has instigated – or, at the very least, nurtured – certain instances of cultural shift within participating congregations where they view themselves as viable agents in the community of academic support.

Parents and Students as Leaders

This outcome is a bit more amorphous and difficult to track. However, it should be noted that participants acknowledge acquiring new skill sets that should embolden them in the future. Noted one participant about skills gained: "I think the process probably strengthened me and [left me] feeling capable to facilitate such a project in the future."

Another participant indicated that the program allowed parents to unify and perhaps develop new ministries: "It definitely brought the parents closer together, and I think it may stir some ministries that didn't exist prior to the program."

Beyond that, interviewees listed the following as skills they now feel more comfortable implementing: communication, listening, grant writing, recruiting volunteers, and collaboration. These new tool kits will undoubtedly serve these congregations well in the future.

Summary

Implementing a program that involved close to 300 families has been a significant effort. The ambitious scope of the FLI nurtured a tremendous enthusiasm from the majority of participants. However, as with any pilot program, numerous concerns developed during implementation. Some of the more significant difficulties had to do with attendance, compliance, and capacity. Congregations have highly variable subcultures that are formed by history, geography, language, theology, and polity – just to name a few. A sweeping program on the scale of FLI will, therefore, have inherent impediments as various churches execute it within their respective milieus.

Another concern verbalized to the evaluation team about the FLI had to do with sustainability. Our first interpretation of that concern is that it indicates participants' deep satisfaction with and enthusiasm for the program. They tend to think that it is working and worthwhile. Second, it illuminates the breadth and scope of the program for the congregations: It is a major undertaking that requires serious, concerted support. It should also be noted that (quite organically) our analysis of the data indicated that the anticipated outcomes had some measure of success. Interviewees, unprompted, frequently discussed outcomes that had been anticipated by the designers of FLI.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The fall 2011 Family Leadership Initiative program was, by and large, a successful pilot. It reached a large and appropriate population and delivered on several of the program's stated objectives, including nascent intercongregational cooperation, strengthening families, and creating the seeds of a new shared culture of concern about academic achievement. Congregations are eager to continue – so eager that they express significant concerns about the sustainability of their own efforts and of the continuity of the foundation's commitments.

An important dimension of the sustainability concern is total labor. The 137 paid and volunteer staff responding to surveys – who are a large but incomplete fraction of the total – reported a cumulative investment of nearly 800 hours weekly. Clergy reported spending an average of 13 hours per week, with four reporting more than 30 hours per week. On one hand, this reflects a significant success of the foundation's grant program in using small amounts of money to redirect the church's time focus toward

Having dozens of congregations using their collective capacities toward a common end is a significant accomplishment in its own right. The future success of the program, however, will hinge on whether the modifications to the program will strike a delicate balance that nurtures sustainability, collaboration, and responsiveness.

community service and education, paying for or inspiring labor equivalent to four or five full-time-equivalent staff years in the space of 10 to 12 weeks. The evaluation team counseled the foundation to attend closely to the burden created by the program, especially for clergy.

In response to feedback from participants and the evaluation team, the foundation has modified the program for the fall 2012 implementation. First, the congregations will coalesce as six cluster groups. This is a response to the variability of congregational capacity. Some of the participating congregations had found the budget process especially taxing. In addition, the clustering is seen as an avenue for nurturing further networking and collaboration. The foundation envisions the clusters uniting around one language, denomination, geography, or some other commonality. Local nonprofits will be enlisted to function as coordinators of the clusters. The foundation has modified a cluster strategy that has successfully been implemented by the Skillman Foundation in Detroit.[14] For FLI, the foundation sees the cluster strategy as offering numerous advantages: greater financial

accountability, opportunities for peer learning, better cooperation, easier implementation of computer labs, and more efficient oversight and technical support.

Beyond the clusters, the 2012-2013 iteration of FLI allows for congregations to choose program levels. Recognizing the variable capacities and subcultures of the congregations, the foundation will allow each church to select the duration of its program from three options. Of course, choosing a shorter program also translates into a smaller grant: the basic level (10 weeks) includes a $3,000 grant; the standard level (12-14 weeks) includes a $5,000 grant; and the premium level (16 weeks) includes a $7,000 grant.

Finally, the foundation reconvened the cohorts in April and May for two weeks of sessions intended to refine the structure and substance of the pilot program. The modified program now includes "module" language. The cohorts and the foundation distilled the programming into five modules: ministry and worship, family dinner, parent training, student training, and family enrichment. In the new model, instead of all five components occurring in a single evening, the congregations may choose to separate the modules and insert them into the calendar of the church in a pattern that best resonates with that particular community. In addition, because of the success of Khan Academy in the first iteration, the modified program will require all congregations to implement it. To support that requirement, the foundation has provided mobile iPad labs that each congregation may access at least once a week.

The new cluster structure may be an effective way to address concerns about total labor, but it remains to be seen whether the new model relieves burdens rather than increasing them. Given that capacity has been a congregational concern and that the new cluster structure might place some additional burdens on congregations, sustainability will continue to be a central question in the evaluation process. It will also be worthwhile to track whether the new flexibility of the FLI related to time length and module

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[14] See http://ifbfd.org/documents/Skillman/www/members/years/year3-resource-guidepdf.pdf.

adaptation will allow congregations to implement the program in the manner most effective for their community.

The cornerstone observation of this article, from interactions with participants and clergy, is that sustainability is a primary concern of the congregations' own evaluations. This prevalence has several implications. One is that the concern stems from a high level of satisfaction and a desire to continue. Congregational leaders are excited about and pleased with the program, sometimes a little surprised at their own accomplishments, and generally highly satisfied with the foundation's efforts. Another is that the program is a major undertaking that requires significant support, and many leaders and staff are concerned about

not losing momentum and about maintaining the capacity to continue the FLI program.

One year into the program, it remains difficult to ascertain the overall impact of the FLI on academic achievement in Grand Rapids. At this point, though, the level of enthusiasm and engagement from these participating congregations has to be seen as a success. Having dozens of congregations using their collective capacities toward a common end is a significant accomplishment in its own right. The future success of the program, however, will hinge on whether the modifications to the program will strike a delicate balance that nurtures sustainability, collaboration, and responsiveness.

Appendix

The specific qualitative methodology used to evaluate the program included focus groups, program observations, and semi-structured interviews. The focus groups were formed by recruiting from the pre-existing cohorts of clergy and adult/youth members who had participated in the spring congregational learning teams. This self-selected sampling method produced 20 volunteers from the adult/youth cohort and 12 volunteers from the clergy cohort.

The purpose of these focus groups was to gain introductory insight into how members viewed the program-planning process led by the foundation in the spring and to glean perceptions on ideas, opinions, and thoughts on the program before the fall implementation. The moderator team consisted of the principal investigator and two research assistants from the evaluation team.

The data from these focus groups consisted of the text transcribed from the audio recording and notes taken by the moderator team. The evaluation team engaged in opening coding-utilizing QSR NVivo software. The emerging themes arose from the following interview schedule:

1. Describe how you became involved with the Action Learning Teams.

2. Tell us about the application process. [What were some of the challenges?]

3. Describe what occurred during the program design. [Explain what you liked about the program design. Describe the most effective part of the program design. Describe any frustrations you may have felt during the program design. What did you most appreciate about the program design?]

4. How would you assess the facilitation of the program design?

5. In what ways might you improve the program design?

6. Describe how the iPad has affected your ministry.

7. Describe how you have used the GoH website.

8. Tell us about the role that theology played in the design process. [How would you articulate the theology that undergirded the process?]

9. Describe any skills [design, grant writing, evaluation, facilitation, etc.] that you may have learned through the program-design process.

10. What did you learn about collective impact and collaboration during the program design? [Examples of networking/collaboration?]

11. Describe, in your own words, the pilot project.

12. How would you assess the pilot project? [How hopeful are you about the possible outcomes?]

13. Tell us about some challenges that concern you related to the pilot project.

14. Describe an outcome that makes the pilot project a success.

15. How would you describe the educational system in Grand Rapids?

16. How might social inequality affect educational outcomes?

17. What ideas do you have for improving the educational system?

18. Describe the role of the church in the education of children.

19. How will participating in this project affect your church?

20. How do you think participating in this program will affect program participants?

After the implementation of the program, additional data were received from program-site visits and semi-structured interviews moderated by the evaluation team. The sample of participants came from five churches that self-selected to be volunteers from an invitation letter. Additionally, four churches were suggested by the foundation as possible participants based on the knowledge that two of the churches had reported struggling to implement the program while the other two reported signs of being positively affected. Three of the four churches accepted the invitation to participate in the program-site visits and semi-structured interviews. Clergy, program-site coordinators, and volunteers participated in the semi-structured interview. The number of participants in each semi-structured interview ranged from two to five. Field notes from the program-site visit were paired with semi-structured interviews that asked the following questions:

1. How many weeks are you into the program?

2. How many children are involved? How many adults? Volunteers?

3. How did you go about recruiting leaders/volunteers?

4. Describe how you spent the budget.

5. Describe any protocols you have in place in the event that a family starts missing meetings.

6. Describe how you became involved with the Action Learning Teams.

7. Tell us about the application process. [What were some of the challenges?]

8. Describe what occurred during the program design. [Explain what you liked about the program design. Describe the most effective part of the program design. Describe any frustrations you may have felt during the program design. What did you most appreciate about the program design?]

9. How would you assess the facilitation of the program design?

10. In what ways might you improve the program design?

11. Describe how the iPad has affected your ministry.

12. Describe how you have used the GoH website.

13. Tell us about the role that theology played in the design process. [How would you articulate the theology that undergirded the process?]

14. Describe any skills [design, grant writing, evaluation, facilitation, etc.] that you may have learned through the program-design process.

15. What did you learn about collective impact and collaboration during the program design? [Examples of networking/collaboration?]

16. Describe, in your own words, the pilot project.

17. Describe how your congregation is implementing its version of the pilot program. [Any unique changes? Something that did not work for you?]

18. How would you assess the pilot project? [How hopeful are you about the possible outcomes?]

19. Tell us about some challenges that concern you related to the pilot project.

20. Describe an outcome that makes the pilot project a success.

21. What is your hope for the children involved in the pilot program? [Look for terms related to: 1) character and 2) academics].

22. Describe the role of the church in the education of children.

23. How will participating in this project affect your church? How do you think participating in this program will affect program participants?

24. Describe any assets that allowed your congregation to become involved in the pilot project. What resources does your church have; what are the strengths [size, structure, polity, location, reputation, etc.]?

25. Describe some significant ministries of this congregation. [Note whether individual or family focus.]

26. What is the role of the church in supporting families?

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