



FAITH CONNECTIONS

WILSON COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

A Case Study





1. Key Program Distinctions

Faith Connections is a publicly funded intermediary that plays a role in linking churches and interdenominational faith-based organizations with low-income individuals in Wilson County, North Carolina. The program is part of the Wilson County Department of Social Services (WCDSS), and is funded through a combination of TANF, State, and local funding. Faith Connections was initially housed offsite in a building donated by one of the area churches. A grant from the NC Department of Commerce (Community Development Block Grant) assisted with refurbishing and remodeling the building for office and training space for the Faith Connections Program and TANF Retention staff. Faith Connections acts as an intermediary in partnership between case managers and staff at WCDSS and the local faith community—especially for more than 70 congregations and nonprofit ministries that are formally connected as Partners in Ministry. Each partnering organization agrees to let WCDSS play a mediating role in supporting low-income families and individuals who come to churches or local

The overall goal of the 70 Faith Connections partnership congregations is to help volunteers and staff members from these local organizations “link up” with the real needs of at-risk individuals; this helps the individuals’ DSS case managers, who can better monitor their cases and help avoid duplication of services by local partners.

nonprofits for support. The overall goal is to help volunteers and staff members at these local organizations become “linked” to the real needs of individuals. The individuals continue to be monitored by their case managers, who can help avoid duplication of services by local congregations; they can also link the organizations’ support to a larger case

plan. Examples of the services Faith Connections provides include one-time monetary support; job-shadowing and job-training opportunities; and provision of food aid, clothing assistance, and other benefits. Case workers within WCDSS and local partners see Faith Connections’ intermediary role as a constructive, unique “link” between two communities that previously did not work together in any official capacity. In short, today Faith Connections supports Wilson County’s TANF program by bringing to bear the resources and volunteer support of more than 70 congregations and social service partners, and by acting as an intermediary within the WCDSS office. A list of site visit participants consulted in developing this report is included as an appendix.

2. Wilson County Demographics

As of 2007, Wilson County was home to 76,069 individuals and 8,631 families with children under the age of 18. Identified as one of the top 20 small markets in the South, Wilson County is a robust industrial area. Some of its diverse industries include aerospace, pharmaceuticals, life sciences, building materials, automotive parts, food manufacturing, and plastics. With a median income of \$36,740, in 2007, Wilson County had an unemployment rate of 5.4 percent in 2007.

In 2008, an average of 45,322 recipients—including 24,124 families and 37,892 children—were receiving TANF benefits in the State of North Carolina. More information regarding Wilson County’s demographics is presented in Exhibit 1.

3. Faith Connections’ Historical Background and Development

Started in 1998 as an initiative of the WCDSS, Faith Connections is a government intermediary working to connect low-income individuals to both WCDSS and local faith-based services. In other words, Faith Connections is funded by the government to act as an independent “go-between” among institutions, with links to the faith community. Its purpose is to help needy populations obtain services when their needs



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Exhibit 1: Demographic Information for Wilson County^a

Population

2007	76,069
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Ethnicity (2007)

White	53.0%
African-American	38.5%
Asian or Pacific Islander	0.8%
Hispanic or Latino origin ^b	8.3%

Age Composition (2007)

0-19	20,970
20-24	4,659
25-44	20,223
45-64	20,042
65 +	10,175
Median Age	38.0

Gender Composition (2007)

Male	36,335
Female	39,734

Median Income (2007)

per household	\$36,740
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Unemployment Rate

2007	5.4%
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North Carolina TANF Indicators (FY 2008)

Recipients (average)	45,322
Families (average)	24,124
Children (average)	37,892

^a Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2007). *American Community Survey 2005-2007*. Retrieved September 2009 from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_program=ACS&_submenuId=&_lang=en&_ts=
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2008). *TANF Caseload Data*. Retrieved September 2009, from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/data-reports/caseload/caseload_recent.html#2008

^b Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.

cannot be fully met through existing government programs such as TANF.

Since its inception, Faith Connections has been administered by a staff of one full-time coordinator and a part-time administrative assistant. Originally, Faith Connections was run by an ordained minister whose role was to connect local congregations and businesses with the county government, particularly its local department of social services. When, after 5 years, the Faith and Business Coordinator chose to leave for a new post, WCDSS decided to reclassify the position of the administrative assistant who had spent nearly 3 years helping to facilitate the initiative. During the transition, Faith Connections emerged in its present form.

Responsibility for coordinating with local businesses was transferred to a different WCDSS staff member, and the new initiative focused more directly on engaging the faith-based community. With only a part-time administrative assistant and a full-time coordinator, whose salary is currently funded through TANF, State, and county funds, the Faith Connections program has grown tremendously since its implementation 12 years ago. While the initiative does not directly provide services to community individuals or families, the staff establishes resource connections and refers clients to a wide variety of services in the community, including counseling, food assistance, housing, and transportation assistance.

The most important aspect of Faith Connections' ability to partner is its numerous links to more than 70 congregations, nonprofits, businesses, and individuals within the county. Partners are invited to strategically serve TANF and other WCDSS consumers, including Food Stamps recipients, Head Start families, WIC recipients, and others. The faith-based and community organizations agree to serve as Partners in Ministry, and they do so in multiple ways. Each partnering congregation or faith-based social service program begins by agreeing to join a community of organizations that collaborate with WCDSS.



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Moreover, by joining the program, each partnering organization indicates its support for the underlying principle of Faith Connections: individual congregations can more effectively serve WCDSS clients if they are aware of WCDSS' existing support for needy families and individuals. Liaisons from faith and community partners interface with the Faith Connections Coordinator, and, where appropriate, with the case managers of individuals in need. In addition, WCDSS staff ask faith and community partners for help on a real-time, as-needed basis. Sometimes requests are for short-term food aid; other times, they are for clothing or job training or mentoring. Often, the faith and community partners offering a particular opportunity will want to make other organizations within the network aware of a service opportunity—or the opportunity to collaborate in serving an individual family. In short, the network created by Faith Connections allows for rich communication among more than 70 partners and with WCDSS case managers, allowing Faith Connections to coordinate the care of about 1,000 Wilson County residents each year.

Each Partner in Ministry must support the underlying principle that individual congregations can more effectively serve local clients if they are aware of WCDSS' existing role in their lives. Liaisons from the congregations interface with Faith Connections, local staff can ask congregations for help on a real-time, as-needed basis, and the faith communities that respond often choose to collaborate in providing emerging support for a family or individual in need.

4. Programmatic Information

As noted, the structure of the Faith Connections program is unusual, focusing on communication, coordination, and enhanced service delivery to help fill the gap beyond

WCDSS's own services. When the county's case managers encounter clients with needs that cannot be met through existing government programs, for example, they contact Faith Connections. The Program Coordinator of Faith Connections reaches out via phone or email to its network of congregations and nonprofit organizations to fulfill these requests for assistance. Moreover, when any of the Partners in Ministry are approached for volunteer help by community residents, the partners are encouraged, by the terms of their Faith Connections letters of agreement, to refer the individuals to WCDSS. Individuals are connected through the WCDSS to congregations or other nonprofits where their needs can be personally supported, and beneficiaries can receive support. This process also benefits the Partners in Ministry because it ensures that all of the individuals they serve have been assessed by a case manager; it also allows a wider network, rather than just one source, to help support a family or individual.

The Faith Connections Coordinator is an employee of the WCDSS and, while her connections with the Partners in Ministry are critical, it is significant that case managers and others on staff at WCDSS view her as a trusted colleague, not someone paid by the congregations. While most Faith Connections "deliverables" for low-income families and individuals are provided with nonpublic funding, delegated TANF funds are used to support some of Faith Connections' administrative and program costs, including office space.

Faith Connections is co-located in Career Plus, a WorkFirst self-sufficiency center and has convenient access to a large conference room. Its monetary contributions from Partners in Ministry are nowhere near its volunteer capacity, but they are nonetheless worth noting: Faith Connections received \$115,303 from Partners in Ministry between July 2002 and May 2009. Some Partners in Ministry organizations pledge to provide direct services with their Faith Connections referrals (such as counseling or food assistance), while others provide



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regular or as-needed financial donations. Hundreds of volunteers have been involved in service events supported by Faith Connections.

Latitude among partners is emphasized, with a “big tent” approach aimed at connecting more partners rather than fewer. Faith Connections allows the Partners in Ministry to set their own contribution amounts and donation schedules—and, since Faith Connections’ staff costs are covered by WCDSS, 100 percent of all donations go directly to service provision. Several congregational partners described how this makes giving more attractive to parishioners: all collected funds go directly to support people in need. With this local support base, in 2008 Faith Connections served 930 families in Wilson County, providing \$26,353 in financial assistance and \$29,986 in nonmonetary assistance.

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The majority of requests Faith Connections receives are for emergency needs that go beyond TANF support, and staff work hard to respond to all inquiries for support within 24 hours of receipt. Most often, these requests come from WCDSS case managers, who are required to submit a standardized referral form, which includes a release of confidentiality (to allow cross-partner dialogue) and a liability release (so that WCDSS is not legally responsible for volunteer behavior). This allows Faith Connections to discuss cases freely with its partners, in

settings where each client’s case manager deems this to be in the client’s best interest.

To support their clients, DSS case managers must deliver any check requests in-house, to complete an assistance contract. This procedure guarantees the legitimacy of the referral and requires the client to sign off a partnering congregation or outside nonprofit service request. Recipients must agree not to go to that congregation or nonprofit to ask for the same resource. Instead, their line of communication runs through their case worker, and through the Faith Connections Coordinator, who helps guide the outside faith partner to a better informed kind of support. In the case of financial resources from the Partners in Ministry, a check can typically be cut within minutes—and ranges from \$15 for a pair of used shoes to over \$600 to help with rent. The average monetary request is between \$200 and \$300; nonmonetary requests range from a bicycle to educational support.

In addition to supporting individual and family needs through its Partners in Ministry, Faith Connections also plays a supportive role to clients in a month-long job readiness training class through WorkFirst. The Workfirst job readiness program is primarily for TANF recipients, and it is co-located in the WCDSS Career Plus Center. The Workfirst program supports an Office Mentoring Program, which provides hands-on clerical work experience for TANF WorkFirst clients. Participants are offered training in reception and general office supports (including operating copiers, fax machines, and phone systems), and a comprehensive computer tutorial program, as well as additional resources from Career Plus Outfitters Room (CPOR). Faith Connections CPOR supplies business attire, accessories, and make-up to individuals for job interviews, and these supplies are often supplemented by affiliated Partners in Ministry. The Faith Connections Coordinator also provides support for the annual Greater Wilson Area Job Fair. Once again, donations from outside congregations in this way supplement—and in



the words of one nonprofit partner—“add mileage to” existing WCDSS initiatives supporting needy families.

Finally, Faith Connections provides opportunities for local congregations to provide other forms of support, such as coat drives and holiday-adoption programs and connects these resources to needy families and children. The program coordinator speaks at a number of local churches about opportunities to collaborate, with the larger goal of connecting local congregations with WCDSS programming and support.

“Before getting on Faith Connections’ listserv, I had no idea most of these events were taking place throughout Wilson County. It’s great being in the know, and finding ways to support each other at times and locations that make sense for our people,” one partner reported.

5. Partnerships and Community Engagement

Since Faith Connections acts primarily as an intermediary between WCDSS and the set of more than 70 local Partners in Ministry, its overall effectiveness depends entirely upon the strength of its partnerships.

Though Faith Connections is most commonly known for its work with churches and other religious congregations, it also partners with other nonprofits and for-profit businesses to support individuals and families serviced by WCDSS. As a rule, if clients’ needs cannot be met through WCDSS services—that is, if they are not eligible for Federal emergency programs, such as TANF, WIC, or Food Stamps—Faith Connections provides direct services or counseling support through its Partners in Ministry.

When asked about its clientele, Faith Connections views its primary “client audience” as WCDSS case managers

and the wide-ranging group of Partners in Ministry, rather than program beneficiaries. Its foremost goal is to support these professionals and volunteers, and to make strategic connections on behalf of WCDSS individuals and families, not to engage in direct service provision. These partnerships, supported by goodwill from outside organizations and TANF case managers, are what will in turn benefit men, women, and children in need. This mentality is a critical component of Faith Connections’ ability to empower the two “sides” of collaboration—both WCDSS case workers, and the local congregations and nonprofits it has brought to the table.

Perceptions in the Faith and Nonprofit Communities

As a kind of extension of WCDSS into the greater community, Faith Connections works with several key constituencies within the City of Wilson. By far its most important partnerships are a diverse group of local churches and other congregations that include the Farmington Heights Church of God, Peace Church, and Shiloh Church. These partners generally appreciate that their own interests and capacity can drive the relationship with Faith Connections, as well as the Faith Connection Coordinator’s openness to diverse congregations willing to collaborate, and the bi-weekly listserv she maintains, which, in the words of one faith partner, helps “connect our church to the work of other congregations serving people—and vice versa.”

Faith Connections also works with a variety of nonprofit organizations, mostly faith-based, that serve alongside Partners in Ministry congregations. Nonprofit partners include the New Christian Food Pantry and Child Development Center; Hope Station, a homeless shelter; and Angel Food Ministries, which supports low-income families with food boxes. Local volunteers said that it has been “eye-opening” for the faith community to become “more networked with these nonprofits.” As one partner explained, “before getting on [the Faith Connection Coordinator’s] listserv, I had no idea most of these events were taking place throughout Wilson County. It’s great being in the



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know, and finding ways to support one another at times and locations that make sense for our people.”

The support runs in two directions, and this helps newer congregations and nonprofits feel more confident about their involvement, in that they are supported by WCDSS. Being an official Partner in Ministry allows nonprofits and other members to refer needy individuals and families to WCDSS and its larger programming infrastructure. The knowledge that appropriate local needs can be met through publicly funded programs assures faith communities and nonprofit providers that their support fills an important gap.

As a result, Faith Connections’ referral system is described by local community leaders as mutually beneficial. First, it takes enormous pressure off churches that have previously been overwhelmed by immediate requests. A congregational leader reported that, prior to working with Faith Connections, her church experienced “an average of 10 ‘walk-ins’ a day.” Because the church was usually willing to help, things quickly ran out of control, and people in the community believed it was a wealthy church. In reality, however, the church was exhausting its diaconal funds—as well as its staff, who spent so much time trying to help the neighborhood, they struggled significantly to get their own jobs done.

Therefore, the congregation-supporting arrangement helps to ensure that monies are spent more efficiently, and families are not going directly to congregations and other nonprofits, taking undue advantage of the unknowing faith community. After joining the Partners in Ministry, members strive not to serve “walk-ins” immediately, but instead link requests to Faith Connections and WCDSS. As a result, individuals are only offered church- or nonprofit-based services after meeting with a case worker, who determines their needs.

As one partner stated, “People don’t realize that if you go to DSS, you will get a lot done. I like that Faith Connections

connects people to the public system. They need to go through the process. Our taxes support this, and I want us to help people the best way that we can.”

Faith Connections’ general flexibility and openness to the different approaches and priorities of its local congregations allows both churches and nonprofits to serve in a manner that

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is comfortable to them. For instance, if church leaders do not feel they have the capacity to provide services, they can simply contribute financially to Faith Connections. If another feels that they are strong in providing counseling services, they can provide these services to families or individuals that have been determined eligible for counseling through WCDSS.

One Partner in Ministry explained that being a part of Faith Connections has provided his church with knowledge of what other churches and groups are doing, but this does not pressure his church to stop providing one service or start providing another. “Many churches do the same things. But with Faith Connections, you don’t have to give anything up, and you are never made to feel [like you have to give anything up]. You just get more resources, and more information, and you learn who else is doing what. Nobody gives up what they are doing unless they choose to, but [the Faith Connection Coordinator’s] network connects them. If you know somebody who does it better, you can learn from them or join them, or whatever. The resources and information are probably most important to us.”



Finally, Faith Connections plays an important liaison role with other staff members at WCDSS. Sometimes when a church has referred a client to the WCDSS, it will inform Faith Connections, whose staff in turn lets the team of case managers know they should be expecting a church referral. Similarly, if the faith community expresses a willingness to support a particular individual or family, Faith Connections shares this information with the team of case workers—even though everyone initially entering the WCDSS system gets the same opportunity to be assessed for government-sponsored resources, public services, and support from the local community.

Perceptions within WCDSS

Local staff members within WCDSS see and value the benefits of Faith Connections' work with the local community. To begin with, the WCDSS programs cover a wide range of services. WCDSS case managers and staff represent programs in Financial Services, Food and Nutrition Services, Child Protective Services, Crisis Services, and TANF. WCDSS case managers reported that the Faith Connections' Coordinator position being funded through DSS is important, because this lends credibility to the overall consistency of service delivery efforts. Because the leadership is fully informed about WCDSS programming, and about the broader community's resources, Faith Connections can be flexible with its referrals. As one WCDSS official described, "[The coordinator] can provide what the State/Federal funds won't allow us to do. The funds come from the churches, thereby giving more flexibility with assistance than State/Federal funds. As a result, the churches buy into it more."

Caseworkers also noted the value of the Faith Connections' Coordinator having access to client information, since she is an official employee of WCDSS. In this respect, the coordinator has capacity beyond that of a typical nonprofit. Because the coordinated services that emerge are linked to a client's larger case plan, Faith Connections' extended work can have further impact in client lives.

WCDSS caseworkers also appreciate Faith Connections' presence because it allows them to help more individuals and families in need and avoid some government restrictions. For them, the ability to provide emergency food services to someone who would otherwise need to wait a week for Food Stamp benefits comes as a welcome addition to State-sponsored programming.

Clear Communication and the Business Community

In addition to connecting with local faith partners, Faith Connections also works with local for-profit businesses that are interested in serving the community. One such partner is a local bank that has worked with Faith Connections on multiple projects in recent years. The bank made the decision to partner with Faith Connections out of its own commitment to being of service to the community-at-large. As a bank, it commits dedicated time for staff members to serve as Faith Connections volunteers. In summer 2009, for instance, it sponsored a backpack project focused on providing backpacks and school supplies to needy children prior to the start of the upcoming school year. The bank worked closely with Faith Connections to determine eligibility and to fill a need identified by WCDSS, which can also help clients receive EITC and VITA support. Both Faith Connections and bank staff described the event as highly successful, and the bank anticipates repeating the event in coming years.

Through ongoing networking by the Faith Connections Coordinator in particular, Faith Connections is committed to working beyond churches and nonprofits alone. Yet in those settings and in interactions with the business community, she typically presents Faith Connections in the same way, handing out an introductory overview and describing, through the use of stories in the lives of real individuals, how the partnership is beneficial.

She also treats potential partners respectfully, and as customers. As one partner described, "One reason we came on



board was that [the coordinator] spent a lot of time educating us as we inquired, but she didn't push us as 'this is what you have to do.' It was presented as our option. It was presented more as a friendship than a 'merger.'" This same voluntary spirit sustains business and congregational partnerships.

Similarly, congregations, nonprofits, and businesses are given freedom to work individually, or in groups. As one partner explained, "Faith Connections has made us more collaborative and more willing to reach across lines. A lot of churches are afraid to work with each other because they are afraid their congregants will leave and go to another church. But we've found that the opposite happens. When working with others, your people become more together—and it attracts people from outside to come in as well. People see the church as part of a larger, collective effort."

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This "customer-service-like" posture guides other dynamics as well—including communication, which is so central to Faith Connections' wider community engagement. By asking for help across congregational, nonprofit, and business lines, positive peer pressure emerges. Often, faith-based leaders will forward Faith Connections' requests to their members or make an announcement during church services, and the needs are often filled quickly.

As one Partner in Ministry explains, "What has made things work is that the Faith Connections Coordinator communicates. She meets with people and brings people in to discuss issues—and good communication has made it work for us."

6. Lessons Learned

Some core insights emerged from Faith Connections' communicative, unique strategy of linking a county DSS to the faith, nonprofit, and business sectors:

- **Successful partnerships should be mutually beneficial to, and mutually aware of, one another's work.** In the context of Faith Connections' relationships, local congregations, nonprofit agencies, for-profit partners, and government offices have unique missions and visions that drive their work. In each partnership, working relationships that support and aid the mission and vision of both agencies are critical—especially to sustain the partnerships over the long term. It also helps for each party to feel that the other understands their fundamental goals, and it is helpful that Faith Connections is run by a leader who can speak the language of the faith-based community.
- **When working with congregations and faith-based organizations where no compensation is involved, flexibility and clear communication are key.** Because faith-rooted agencies have their own goals and methods of assisting local men and women in need, it is important to allow them to "own" their role in the partnership—and for the public agency to collaborate accordingly. Congregations will be more willing to work with the government if their involvement does not mean they have to give up their identity. By clearly articulating legal boundaries and enabling FBCOs to constructively partner, TANF agencies can be successful in engaging with the faith community.
- **Building a large network of outside partners enables government agencies to meet TANF and other client needs beyond their usual ability.** TANF and Food Stamps recipients often need a wide array of services—and sometimes, especially if they are immediate needs, government programs cannot fully address these needs. Faith Connections' innovative partnerships with local



partners have allowed nongovernmental organizations from the faith community and other settings to fill the gap, which in turn provides more holistic support to needy families.

- **Clear, consistent communication with partners and volunteers is essential for keeping the community engaged and effective in meeting local needs.**

Maintaining a listserv with up-to-date information about service opportunities and local needs builds trust, provides a basis for service, and cultivates “capital” with partners and WCDSS officials alike. This trust is essential for maintaining synergy and enabling voluntarism to succeed. It also keeps the larger community “in the loop,” overcomes stereotypes about government bureaucracy, and allows for enhanced collaboration between congregations, nonprofits, and county case managers.

7. Conclusion

Leaders from local congregations, faith-based nonprofits, and other community organizations and for-profit partners say that Faith Connections has made a profound impact on the Wilson County community, both in terms of benefiting TANF recipients and other clients, and in bringing together organizations that previously worked in isolation. WCDSS case managers, similarly, say this program is essential to their ability to successfully serve their clients—tying their work into a larger tapestry of support.

As one *Partner in Ministry* stated, “When we first got invited to join Faith Connections, we didn’t want to stop helping people—we just needed to learn how to help them in a better way. Instead of being a thumb, now we’re part of the whole hand. We have access to more resources through what other partners bring to the table to help people.” Sending volunteers is a critical way that faith communities in particular can serve struggling families or individuals. As another partner described, “Churches can do what no one else can do, because people’s motivation is spiritual. When a pastor stands up and says,

‘folks, we need to do this job God has given to us,’ people will do it. Faith Connections respects the role of pastors and churches, and by not being pushy, it gets more from local partners. Ultimately, I’ve seen how working together like this has gotten more done.”



List of Site Visit Participants – Faith Connections

Glenn Osborne, Director, Wilson County Department of Social Services (WCDSS)

Susan Parker, Social Work Program Manager, WCDSS

Amber Denning, *Career Plus* Human Services Coordinator, WCDSS

Becky Stottlemire, Faith Connections Program Coordinator, WCDSS

Starr Day, Congregational Leader, Farmington Heights Church of God

Rev. Tony Sebastian, Pastor, Peace Church

Russ Hinesley, Elder, Shiloh Church

Elder Marvin and Evangelist Candy Taylor, New Christian Food Pantry & Child Development Center

Linwood Boykin, Executive Director, Hope Station

Rev. Tony and Jewell Rivers, Co-Directors, Angel Food Outreach

Focus Group – TANF/Child Welfare/Food & Nutrition Case Managers and Case managers

Elisa Suarez, Member, City of Wilson Human Relations Commission

TANF FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS INITIATIVE

