

Research proposal

March 2015

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Overall View of Research

- **Exploratory Nature** – The aim of this research is to be a catalyst for new ways of thinking and leading congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations by learning about organizations in a time when the reigning organizational paradigm founded on a hierarchical model has attenuated and a new one informed by social network thinking is emerging.
- **Methodology** – Drawing on social scientific research methods and social network thinking, the methodology for this project will reflect both established and emerging organizational paradigms.
- **Comparing Two Types of Organizational Structures** – Two types of organizational structures will be studied in this project, one grounded in the established hierarchical paradigm and one grounded in the emerging social networking paradigm. Each will be analyzed separately as well as comparatively.
- **Generative** – This research has a bent toward action and seeks to generate ideas that will help leaders be imaginative, engage in educated experiments, and discover new ways of thinking about leading congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations in the future.
- **Reflective Practitioners** - The audience for this project is practitioners, specifically leaders of Jewish and Christian congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations who are reflecting on current organizational structures and practices in light of the influence of social network thinking. These faith-based nonprofit organizations may not be explicitly “religious,” but will have values and origins that reflect their ties to the Jewish and Christian community (for example, the American Jewish World Service and Lutheran World Relief).

Research Questions:

The **aim of this research** is to be a catalyst for new ways of thinking and leading congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations by *learning about organizations in a time when the reigning organizational paradigm founded on a hierarchical model has attenuated and a new one informed by social network thinking is emerging*.

This aim will be addressed with two primary questions. **One question** is: *What can be learned from studying congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations organized around hierarchical values and systems that are adapting to a social network mindset?* Sub-questions include:

- *What happens to these organizations with regard to leadership, decision-making, mission, relationship building and activities as they shift paradigms?*
- *What practices change and/or disappear during this transition?*

- *What, if any, tools and/or practices are primary in this shift?*

Another question is: *What can be learned from studying congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations that emerged in the social network era as they mature?* Sub-questions include:

- *What happens to organizational structures of these organizations as they mature?*
- *When these organizations approach their five-to-ten year anniversary, the early stage of organizational maturity, do they retain the attributes of social network thinking, do they begin to acquire some traits of established hierarchies, or do they evolve into some other kind of organizational entity?*
- *What, if any, practices change or disappear at this stage of the maturation process?*

Several **exploratory questions** linger around the edges and/or at the intersection of the learnings from these two questions. They include:

- In what ways might social network thinking be leveraged to help congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations accomplish their mission?
- Might engaging both hierarchical and social networking thinking create opportunities for bridging participation of multiple generations in congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations? Specifically, how might drawing on social network thinking increase the involvement of disengaged Boomers and currently not engaged Gen Xers in congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations?
- Would engaging in hierarchical *and* social networking thinking help congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations create opportunities for greater impact of their mission in the world and increase meaning-making for individuals?

Methodology:

Taking into account the commitments of the reigning organizational paradigm founded on a hierarchical model and the emerging paradigm informed by social network thinking, the research methodology is a mixed method design, including qualitative interviews and open source data gathering.¹

Two types of organizations will be studied. One type, **established and adapting**, are established organizations adapting social network thinking. A second type, **emerging and maturing**, are organizations birthed in a social network era that are maturing or ten to fifteen years old. Organizations chosen for the study will be

¹ This method has four commitments: it *draws on* established research values, methods and thinking, as well as social networking values, tools, and thinking; it has bound and open-source *data sets*; the *claims* made will be humble, curious and exploratory in nature, with hopes of being generative for hierarchical organizations as well as organization that emerged in the social networking paradigm; and the *value* of this research will be judged as much by its ability to guide congregational and faith-based nonprofit leaders through this transition, as by the validity and reliability criteria of research methods.

discerned using a vetting process with pre-determined criteria. (See section on vetting process.)

Interviews:

The researchers, Hayim Herring and Terri Elton, will interview leaders² of congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations. Interviews will be done in person, over the phone, or via video conferencing and be framed by a common set of questions. Interviews will be recorded and data gathered in the interviews will be analyzed for themes independently and in comparison with the other organizations.

Open Source Data Gathering:

Each organization will be asked to engage their networks in the research process. The researchers, Hayim Herring and Terri Elton, will work with each organization to gather input from their constituents using their existing social network platforms. Conversation will be launched in each network with a common set of questions and then able to move in whatever direction the participants determine. In this way the data is open, both in content and constituents. The data gathered in this process will have a common center and take on the character, in content and constituents, of the network itself. Transcripts of the data collected from these conversations will be analyzed for themes independently and in comparison with the other organizations. This data will also be analyzed using digital analytics with particular focus on who participated, how often constituents participated, which platforms were primary, and what reach the conversation had.

Two Types of Organizational Structures:

Attending to the aim of the research and the two primary questions, two groups of congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations with different organizational structures will be studied: *one grounded in the established hierarchical paradigm and adapting social network thinking and one grounded in the emerging social networking paradigm that is maturing.* The following are the criteria for each group.

Group 1 Criteria – Established and Adapting – congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations grounded in the established hierarchical paradigm adapting social network thinking.

1. Organization is one of the following: Jewish congregation, Christian congregation, or faith-based nonprofit organizations with roots in Judaism or Christianity.
2. Organization established 20 or more years ago.
3. Organization is recognized locally, regionally or nationally as a leader in their field.
4. Organization is not in crisis or transition of key leaders.
5. Organization has acquired or on their way toward acquiring one-third of the following:

² One or two key leaders will be interviewed in each organization. Leaders may include, but not limited to: president/CEO, board chair/council president, and/or rabbi/pastor.

- a. Online presence has participatory elements or a web 3.0 framework.
- b. Actively communicates on social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or similar sites).
- c. Have at least one position (staff or volunteer) leading the organization's messaging in social media platforms.
- d. Have multiple people (staff and/or volunteers) communicating on behalf of the organization on social media platforms.
- e. Have a strategy or system for engaging and communicating on social media platforms.
- f. Experimenting with or operates with a decentralized work environment.
- g. Organizational structure is relatively flat and leans toward being decentralized.
- h. Decision-making is participatory.
- i. The organization's mission is central in decision-making.
- j. The mission is owned and understood through the organization.
- k. Leaders seek feedback, organization has established feedback loops, and feedback influences future decisions.
- l. Transparency is a lived value.
- m. Leadership is shared and shifts based on need and situation.
- n. Leadership is determined by gifts, not simply title.
- o. Dedicates time and energy on evaluating and rethinking organizational structure.
- p. Is realistic about current state, has an understanding of where they want to be, and some idea of next steps.
- q. Leadership has an eye toward the future and studies future trends.

Group 2 Criteria – Emerging and Maturing – congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations grounded in the emerging social networking paradigm that are maturing.

- 1. Organization is one of the following: Jewish congregation, Christian congregation, or faith-based nonprofit organizations with roots in Judaism or Christianity.
- 2. Organization established five to ten years ago.
- 3. Organization is recognized locally, regionally or nationally as a leader in their field.
- 4. Organization is not in crisis or transition of key leaders.
- 5. Organization includes over half of the following:
 - a. Online presence is participatory and/or utilizes a web 3.0 framework.
 - b. Actively communicates on social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or similar sites).
 - c. Have dedicated position leading the organization's messaging in social media platforms.

- d. Have multiple people communicating on behalf of the organization through social media platforms.
- e. Have a strategy or system for engaging and communicating on social media platforms.
- f. Work environment leans toward being decentralized.
- g. Organizational structure is relatively flat.
- h. Decision-making is participatory.
- i. The organization's mission is central in decision-making.
- j. The mission is owned and understood through the organization.
- k. Leaders seek feedback, organization has established feedback loops, and feedback influences future decisions.
- l. Transparency is a lived value.
- m. Leadership is shared and shifts based on need and situation.
- n. Leadership is determined by gifts, not simply title.
- o. Dedicates time and energy on evaluating and rethinking organizational structure.
- p. Leadership has an eye toward the future and studies future trends.
- q. Organization has markers of sustainability – regarding staff, board, and/or financial.
- r. Has, or is establishing, capacity for growth.
- s. Organization has evaluative criteria to assess the impact of the organization.

Vetting Process:

The researchers, Hayim Herring and Terri Elton, will generate a list of potential organizations to study for this project. The list will be based on the researchers knowledge of congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations in consultation with people in their personal and professional networks. Once the list has been created the researchers will investigate each organization by exploring their online presence, reviewing organizational documents, and seeking input about the organization's reputation. Each organization will be rated according to an A-B-C scale:

- A – fit the criteria and prime candidates for the study.
- B – fit many of the criteria and possibly a fit for the study.
- C – do not match the criteria and not a fit from the study.

Once organizations have been rated, the researchers will together determine the top 16-20 organizations to study keeping in mind the following ratio: equal number of Jewish and Christian organizations, 6-8 established and adapting congregations, 6-8 emerging and maturing congregations, and 4-6 established and adapting nonprofits.³

³ The rationale behind this formula is as follows. **Jewish/Christian mix:** As the research team has equal representation of both faith traditions, and believing both faith traditions are wrestling with this reality, it was important for this project to be balanced in this area. **Congregational bend:** While faith-based nonprofit organizations are important to the church ecology, both Jewish and Christian traditions have deep roots in congregations. Therefore the researchers want to have more representation of congregations than faith-based nonprofits and will work with nonprofit

organizations that work with congregations. Upon investigation of the emerging and maturing nonprofits within Jewish and Christian communities, it was decided not to have them participate in the full study as their variance in purpose was great and the researchers had a hard time discerning which nonprofits best fit the overall goal. However, interviews of leaders from emerging and maturing nonprofits will be conducted if possibilities emerge and are deemed helpful.