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FACILITATING TRANSREGIONAL AND INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATIONS: HOW RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS AID IN ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY IN A RURAL TEXAS FOOD DESERT[1]

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ABSTRACT: *Food desert literature, generally concerned with the access of poorer households to retail food outlets and varying qualities of food as they relate to the locations and densities of obese populations, is essentially an examination of the economic landscape. As a public health issue the problem of food deserts has persuaded some arguments in favor of government intervention to improve the availability of large-scale grocery stores, but few if any studies have considered the larger environment, contextualizing the role of non-market and non-civic services in mitigating against food insecurity concerns. Considering rural areas as generally resource deficient as compared to urban population centers, and contemporary church congregations as contrary to market and civic service structures, this study seeks to synthesize social scientific scholarship about religious organizations as centers of voluntarism, especially scholarship in the sociology of religion, with food desert research and economic geography. It further examines the religious landscape of a rural Texas food desert to uncover how voluntarism may enable underserved or poor households to achieve food security. Relying on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, this study found that church congregations in the selected rural community serve as important local nodes enabling transregional and inter-institutional collaborations between local, state and federal government social outreach programs committed to improving access to healthy food.*

Keywords: *Food desert, food insecurity, rural, church, voluntarism*

INTRODUCTION

The 'food desert' as a metaphor for economically underserved and low-income areas lacking access to healthful food, specifically fresh fruits and vegetables, has in recent years become a popular topic of discussion in academic, media, and political circles. The statistical correlation between such areas and higher incidences of obesity and other diet-related health problems suggests to many researchers that access to large grocery stores and corporate supermarkets, generally found to offer the cheapest sources of healthful food, is essential to combating America's rising trend in obesity (Walker et al., 2010b). Food deserts are further conceptually linked to food insecurity (Walker et al., 2010a), or the inability of a household to obtain sufficient quantities of nutritious food necessary to maintaining an active and healthy lifestyle (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2011). Such households, typically of limited socioeconomic means, suffer disrupted eating habits and reduced nutrition, often observed in higher incidences of obesity and other diet-related health problems (Bhattacharya et al, 2004). Many contemporary approaches to resolving problems of limited access to healthful food, and subsequent food insecurity, follow from questions about what government can do to provide relief, prompting researchers to recommend increased subsidies and tax breaks to incentivize the establishment of large grocery stores and supermarkets in underserved areas (Papas et al., 2007; Larson et al., 2009; Feng et al., 2010; Segal, 2010). Smith and Morton (2009) nonetheless report that local community support, including community funded food assistance programs, is a social norm in rural food desert counties in Minnesota and Iowa. This observation raises interesting questions about the existence of potentially overlooked social practices and entities that may contribute greatly to countering food insecurity, particularly in rural areas where the customer base is insufficient to support a large grocery store. Further, given the deep historical roots of America's religious landscape and a church's general nature as a community-based organization (Warner, 1993), it would be valid to assume the availability of churches and accompanying ministerial services in rural areas despite the lack of robust local government infrastructure and the agglomeration of services typical to large urban centers. Such considerations and the available literature on church inspired voluntarism (Warner, 1993; Ammerman, 1997; Wuthnow, 2004; Chen and Lind, 2007) encourage interest in how religious organizations in rural food deserts may mitigate against the threat of food insecurity.

According to Walton (2007), despite an academic twentieth-century trend toward distancing philanthropy and charitable kindness away from spiritual motivations, "social work [in the United States] has its historical roots in [organized] religion" (p. 171). Codified in Elizabethan Law of the sixteenth century, care of the distressed and poor was in fact the established purview of the Church. In America this cultural inheritance initially translated into the development of numerous private and faith-based poverty relief institutions, albeit organized around ethnic or national heritages and sometimes by gender as might be expected given the population distribution and cultural climate of the country's earlier history. Only in the late nineteenth century with the rise of Progressivism and a cultural shift toward identifying poverty with structural versus personal failures, did efforts to care for the needy begin to transition away from local community structures. The Great Depression served further as a powerful catalyst for enabling President Franklin D. Roosevelt's numerous social policies, paving the way for President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" and the harnessing of social work as the primary responsibility of the federal government (Fisher, 1980; Bartowski and Regis, 2003).

Noting the development of national level poverty relief efforts, Harrison (1967) writes that "religion and professional social work" (p. 18) have diverged from one another, and, in fact, he suggests an opposition between the two given the primary ministry focus of the Church and a supposed conservative political orientation, echoing the concerns of later researchers (Belcher et al., 2004). Such an observation seems highly unwarranted in light of the literature, however, and suggests a fallacious "either-or" paradigm. Still today, in fact, as was the case previously in our more locally structured society, private relief organizations, both secular and faith based, have continued to work with public entities on behalf of the poor (Bartowski and Regis, 2003). Supported often by only internal donations and volunteer work, religious congregations have been observed providing "food and clothing pantries, limited financial aid, job referrals, tutoring, child care, language classes and self-help programs" (Pipes and Ebaugh, 2002, p. 50). Local church communities have also been observed using the same limited organic resources in providing care for the elderly with regards to "issues of loneliness, crisis readjustment, home health care, and emergency needs" (Steinitz, 1982, p. 43).

As concerns fears about political orientation (Harrison, 1967; Belcher et al., 2004), Ammerman (2001) concluded, having intensively studied 549 congregations across America, that "activist" congregations in pursuit of ulterior motives are the exception and not the rule. Religious congregations were found to be generally apolitical and very giving, with the effect of "immediate enrichment and relief" (*Summary*, para 1) to the associated communities. Complementing this finding, Wuthnow (2004) also argues in favor of faith-based social work, asserting that religious organizations are collectively advancing civil society, but nonetheless sees them limited in resolving numerous structural problems associated with poverty, thereby necessitating government involvement.

Beyond overt and officially sponsored acts of giving, however, religious congregations perform functions that seem beyond the capability of government to provide at the local level. Consider Chen's (2008) assessment of religious organization in Taiwanese immigrant communities as a "repository of social capital" (p. 196). Not merely structures that organize collective worship, religious institutions represent social networks that informally, through association between members, impart valuable local knowledge and provision material, social, cultural, and psychological support to include childcare needs, transportation assistance and education. For Taiwanese immigrants to the United States, far from their more familiar spiritual surroundings, religious institutions offer new reference points that aid in the cultural metamorphosis of new immigrants. In rural areas, dislocated from the agglomeration of public and private services common to large urban centers, similar reliance on faith-based social networks and infrastructures might also be expected, particularly as it is unlikely for rural areas to receive equitable attention from government services and programs given the limited number of people.

This research project hypothesized that rural food desert communities would lean on religious organizations for relief of hunger and food insecurity given the limited availability of other options; and that a reliance on the social capital affiliated with church membership would be reflected in higher membership rates as compared to national averages, thereby evidencing an adopted coping strategy to counter limited availability of healthful food. While the selected study area was indeed isolated from numerous government and market services, I found it nonetheless tied into a larger social, civic, and economic network with religious organizations serving as nodes that facilitated transregional and inter-institutional collaborations. Interestingly, church membership rates were actually determined to be significantly lower than national averages.

METHODOLOGY AND STUDY AREA

This study ultimately seeks to bring together social scientific scholarship about religious organizations as centers of voluntarism, especially scholarship in the sociology of religion, with food desert research and economic

geography. As such, the intent is to describe the religious landscape of a rural food desert and to identify vital economic services provided by or through religious organizations, enabling underserved or poor households to achieve food security. As religion is a common aspect of America's cultural landscape, I chose the selected study area, centered on Florence, Texas, for its distance from full service grocery store, and for features that emphasized the problem of food insecurity.

I approached my study of the Florence area using qualitative methods, seeking to combine participant observation with semi-structured interviews facilitated by guide questions that were used to focus subjects' responses as necessary. In order to better understand the socioeconomic condition of the area and its market size, or the coverage area supported by the few public and private services agglomerated in Florence, I also interviewed two Florence residents employed by the town, and the store owner of Vic's Grocery, the lone limited service grocery store and sole provider of fresh fruits and vegetables in the area. These conversations revealed an economic relationship between Florence and a handful of smaller underserved towns, Andice, Briggs, and Mahomet (see Figure 1), whose populations support Vic's Grocery and define its market size. This information aided in identifying the edges of the food desert, and convinced me to incorporate the smaller towns into the study area.

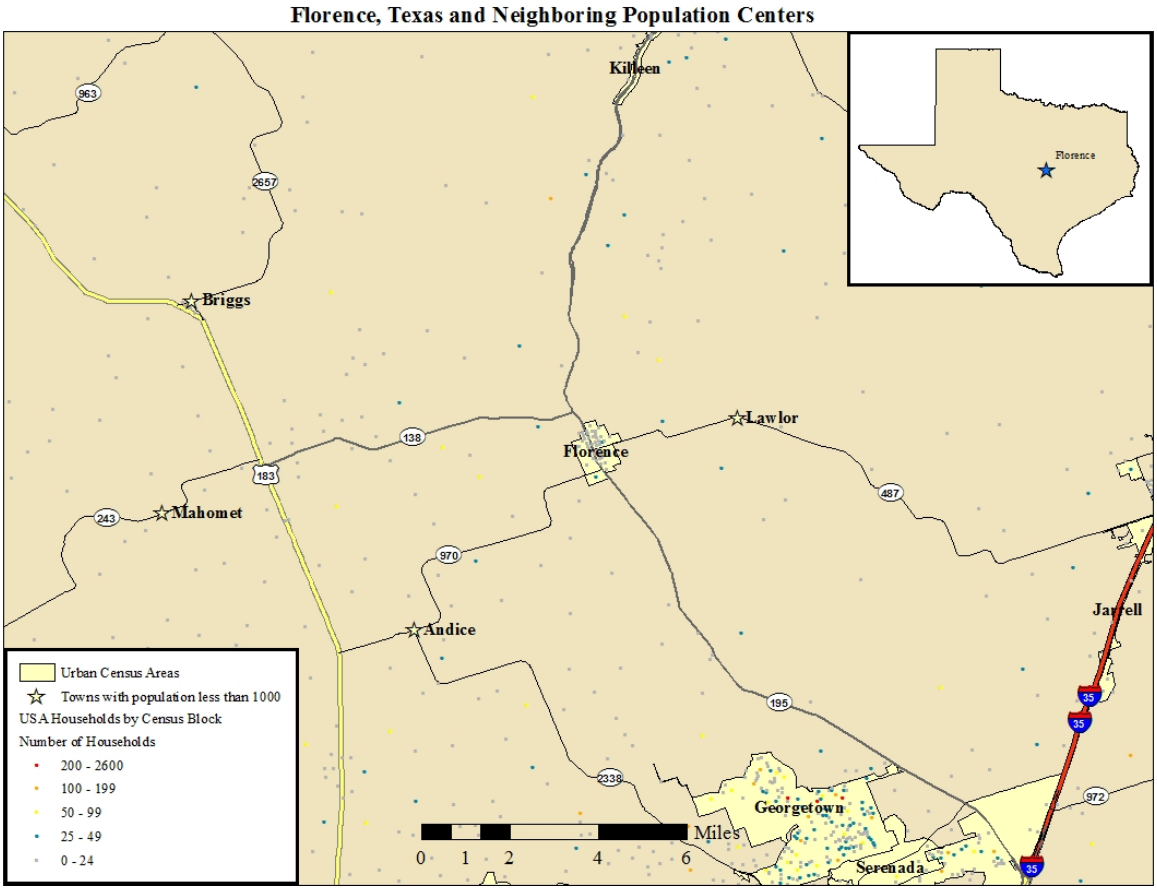

Figure 1: Florence and neighboring towns, to include the larger cities of Georgetown and Killeen, showing the distribution of households to emphasize the rural characteristics of the study area.

Vic's Grocery is a small business offering a limited selection of items, particularly with regards to healthier fresh fruits and vegetables, and at higher prices as compared to larger stores capable of dispersing costs over larger inventories. The additional seven retail food outlets in the town and surrounding area are best described as general stores or cafés that cater to a small local clientele as well as travelers along Highways 183 and 195 (see Figure 1). The closest full service grocery stores are located 15 miles away in Georgetown to the south, and 20 miles away in Killeen to the north, both in excess of the 10 mile distance used to define rural areas with poor access to healthful, affordable food (Blanchard and Lyson, 2006; Morton and Blanchard, 2007; Ploeg et al., 2009). The average

household income in Florence is below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Threshold (US Census Bureau, 2010), indicating that households on average are likely to qualify for government food aid in the form of WIC or SNAP, although there are no local government offices in Florence dedicated to disbursing these entitlements. Consequently, being low-income and lacking proximity-based access to a full-service grocery store, Florence can be described as a food desert (Walker et al., 2010b). Obesity and food insecurity levels in and around Florence have unsurprisingly been measured at levels higher than the national average (USDA, 2015).

Despite the lack of market-based services and government infrastructure, Internet searches and fieldwork revealed at least 11 churches that service the residents of these four towns and the surrounding areas (see Table 1). A total of 12 subjects were interviewed at eight churches, all priests/pastors or congregation members who assisted me in understanding poverty and food insecurity issues suffered by area inhabitants. Widespread poverty is evident in the cultural landscape of Florence as observable by numerous unkempt and dilapidated structures, particularly homes with makeshift repairs to windows, sidings, and roofs, and several yards filled with scrap metal and inoperable vehicles that have been cannibalized for parts.

Table 1: Comparison of Church Membership to Town Populations

Town	Population	Church	Membership
Andice	25	Andice Baptist Church*	100
		Santa Rosa Catholic Church*	100
Briggs	92	Briggs Baptist Church*	100
		Briggs Methodist Church	20
Florence	1147	First Baptist of Florence*	125
		Florence Church of Christ	60
		Florence United Methodist*	50
		Lawlor United Methodist*	75
		St. Emmanuel Pentecostal*	15
		Victory Tabernacle United	30
Mahomet	47	Mahomet Christian Church*	30

Source: www.city-data.com provided the figures for town populations; church memberships are based on the estimates of church pastors or other available church leader. Churches at which I conducted interviews are marked with an asterisk. Lawlor is not an actual town and in fact has a Florence address, but is marked separately in Figure 1 to show its actual location from the study area's primary source of public and market services.

Residents are drawn to the area by lower rents and property taxes according to city workers, but economic conditions nonetheless make it difficult to afford to live. The town consequently has a changeover rate of approximately 30 to 40 households each month, or ten percent, prompting city workers to describe Florence as a transient town. Rent and utility theft is a big problem as newcomers rack up bills and move on suddenly without notice and without paying rent, water or electricity bills. The City Hall has increased water usage fees in an attempt to recoup losses and charges newcomers a deposit, adding to the financial burden of already disadvantaged people. Further, a significant number of residents, approximately 60 percent by one city worker's estimate[2], are Hispanic or migrant Mexican laborers who are flocking to Florence to work in nearby fields and quarries. According to the Hispanic Pentecostal minister at St. Emmanuel Church these workers are being paid largely unskilled labor rates, send a significant portion of their income back home in the form of remittances, and have the added problem of limited English speaking skills that restrict educational opportunities and their prospects for future, higher paying jobs. The pastor at the Baptist church in Andice said he knew of several essentially homeless families. To illustrate, he discussed the circumstances of a couple living in a horse trailer on a farmer's property. There are no shelters in the Florence area, but some households are welcoming, as are occasionally churches, but on a more temporary basis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Observations in the selected study area reflected two major trends through which the local churches assisted distressed and food insecure individuals. In the first trend, individuals benefited, as would be expected, from an affiliation achieved simply through associating with members of a church congregation, similar to the way in which a family helps out its members. I also found, however, in a second trend, that despite the lack of local access to services associated with government and market services, the Florence area churches served as nodes facilitating transregional and inter-institutional collaborations, thereby connecting a dispersed rural population into a larger network of social, civic and economic services vital to mitigating against poor access to healthful foods and food insecurity. Despite the importance of these religious organizations, I found that church membership rates were actually significantly lower than national averages.

Affiliation Through Association

Table 1 shows that the towns of Andice, Briggs, Florence and Mahomet, are home to 1,311 people, and that their 11 churches have a combined membership of 705 people as estimated by each minister or other church leader. Not counting the cities of Georgetown and Killeen, and assuming a ten-mile radius for Florence's market size[3], the study area encompasses an approximate 11,000 people according to 2010 census data contained in the Esri data layer (USA Households by Census Block) shown in Figure 1. By this measure, only 6.4 percent of the study area is supporting these 11 local churches, and fewer still since several members are attending from Georgetown, Killeen and beyond, generally from within a ten mile radius, although in a few exceptions, members travel thirty miles or more to attend church services according to interviewed subjects. Based on Gallup (2010) polling, approximately 43 percent of Americans attend church on a weekly basis, although research by Chaves (2011) found that this number is actually closer to 25 percent.[4] Surprisingly, therefore, rather than finding higher church attendance rates in response to Florence's limited economy, the research actually found a significantly lower rate.

According to the pastor at the First Baptist in Florence who has dedicated 26 years to ministry service in both urban and rural communities, financial hardships do not increase church membership. In his experience, spiritual needs take second place to material needs during crises, although people may become more willing to hear ecclesiastical messages and fulfill spiritual needs once they realize that church members care. "That's human nature, to focus first on worldly needs," he told me.

> Anytime you have a decline in the economy, the stock market, or money gets tight, giving actually gets tighter. There's less in the church offerings and more people seeking help. It can be hard for us to minister and live out scripture. More people in need, but less being given to support ministry.

During difficult economic times he has seen church memberships decline, especially in small churches located in rural areas. Attributing this phenomenon to a "consumer mentality in church today", he said that church attendance was predicated on what people think they can receive for themselves and not what they think they can give to others. Of the 12 interviews conducted between eight Florence area churches, ten subjects related a similar feeling, often citing the popularity of large churches or even mega churches with several thousand members. Such organizations offer segmented ministry specific to young children, teenagers, senior adults, men, women, couples and other groups, supporting a wide variety of activities and benefits. Although many of the churches in the Florence area offered similar programs, their small sizes and isolated locations limited financing and resourcing of the same programs at a consequent reduction in material benefits to members. Other benefits some local church leaders might like to offer, like a community garden, which would potentially be more readily organized in a rural area given the availability of cheaper land, have been hampered by drought conditions. Consequently, the impression is that many in the larger Florence community are attending churches in Austin and Killeen. All interviewed subjects knew of at least a few people commuting to these areas to attend church services.

Even so, the isolation and small community of people within the Florence area, particularly within the towns' official boundaries, invites an intimacy that many feel is lacking in the larger churches located in urban settings. As stated by the First Baptist of Florence pastor, the unique circumstances and rural Florence setting

> offers us a different way to minister and you will see the church [members] coming together more strongly to help out each other, those in need, and to get involved. It puts a face on problems, because friendships are there, through interacting in the church and the community. So it really inspires helping because there's that empathy through bonding in the church.

Complementing these observations, the pastor at the Andice Baptist Church also discussed affiliation through association at his church:

> The church really helps facilitate community relationships. Not everyone will make their needs known, and many don't because there's a level of pride that has to be surrendered to say that you are in need and can't support yourself or your family. A lot of people feel embarrassed that they are struggling or feel imposing if they ask for help, but they don't always have to, because, as an example, when a member stops showing, others might call to make sure that things are okay. That I think makes it easier for people to come forward with their personal struggles. And as others in need see that, they feel okay also making their needs known, and more people get helped.

He felt, however, that it was particularly difficult for people to say that they were hungry, and that this specific issue was not always apparent. Across the street at Santa Rosa, the manager of the Catholic Church's Benevolence Fund said that in his experience food is prioritized last for struggling people.

> They want to take care of higher cost problems first, the mortgage or rent, car payments or utilities, and will delay telling you that they can't feed themselves, or just not tell you at all. You really have to anticipate needs in many cases and our members are very good at that because they know each other and learn very quickly what people need by being around them and sensing someone needs help. So we have had members step up and organize a food drive to get people through a hard time, or will give [grocery] money, or pay to fill up a car so that someone can get to the store to buy food. We have had members even do the shopping for people who were bed ridden, and then cook them their meals or bring home cooked meals.

Such instances of giving are not organized by the church leadership but are the consequences of human interaction and human empathy. Each interviewee related similar stories from their own experiences, equating church with an intimate community, even a fictive kinship network. "Joining a church is getting plugged into a family, and families look out for one another," one interviewee at Briggs Baptist Church told me.

At the very small church in Mahomet I was told of an elderly couple, members of the church, who had bought a home in a retirement community in Georgetown. When the economy crashed in 2008, the man's former employer went under and the couple lost their pension, forcing them to liquidate to meet mortgage payments—but at the cost of their diets and health. For several months the church members organized whatever care they could provide to ensure the couple could eat and continue to make doctors' appointments. Ultimately, anonymous donors from the church paid the remaining balance on the bank note, making the couple solvent. Since then the couple has gone out of their way to help the church and community, even forming a nonprofit organization dedicated to fixing household appliances, an application of a once retired skill. To quote one subject in a group interviewed at the Church of Christ in Mahomet, "all that happened within the context of the church and within the context of community." A second local adherent imparted a personal lesson, that "struggling people help struggling people. Community has a face. It's personal. It's family. It's love." Reflecting on the perceived image of some larger urban churches in the Bible Belt, as discussed earlier in the interview, a third added that

> what church communities are supposed to do [is] love and take care of each other, not make people feel guilty if they don't give a certain amount of money. And it's not about political dreams or protesting gays or soldiers or Muslims. 'Whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me, and whatever you do not do for them, you do not do for me.' That's what Jesus said.

Interviewees frequently made reference to that Bible teaching found in Matthew 25:45, and the pastor at the First Baptist Church of Florence explained that pattern:

> Ministry is helping meeting needs, so that's what we [the Church] are about. Whatever the need—physical, spiritual, psychological, material—the purpose of the Church is to fulfill that need, if we can. We are not to judge a person or question a need . . . or operate based on some ulterior motive. . . Christians believe, or are supposed to believe, that our faith is known through our works.

Given that many human relationships—as among family, club members, and co-workers—are likely to promote an affiliation through association, the internal process of giving and caring as described here is probably not a unique characteristic qualifying the relationship between church members in the Florence area. As determined by Musick et al (2000), however, there is a positive association between church attendance and community volunteering, in that people self-reporting high frequency rates of church attendance were found to be more likely to also volunteer charitably. The religious context of the worldview espoused by subjects I interviewed, therefore, may be more useful in understanding the perceived roles of each congregation in the larger secular community.

Connections Among Communities

Cities developed over time in response to numerous factors, perhaps none more important than the cost-saving (i.e. resource conserving) agglomeration of markets that provision goods and services in exchange for raw materials from rural surroundings. Urban and rural localities, therefore, do not exist apart from one another, but are instead intertwined through an exchange of resources. Despite the general lack of government services common to larger urban areas, such as post offices, libraries, and community centers—not to mention government funding necessary to support such services—the Florence area is not as isolated as I had hypothesized. As sociologist Ammerman (2001) notes, the successful advancement of social welfare causes by American faith-based religious organizations occurs through a partnership with multiple public and private non-profit entities. This relationship is no less apparent in the larger Florence community despite its relative isolation and limited resourcing ability. Just as relationships within churches were found to be vital to sustaining members, so also did I discover external relationships between urban and rural localities, and between secular and non-secular entities, that were important to sustaining the community and relieving the stresses of hunger and food insecurity.

Beyond an affiliation through association that invites caring and giving, each church described methods of outreach to individuals in the community and Central Texas who are not necessarily church members. Given the relative geographical isolation, the dispersion of a sparse population, and limited logistical capabilities, church leaders and members highlighted their inadequate resources for directly reaching those suffering from hunger and food insecurity. That is one reason many of the churches have partnered with the schools in Florence proper to facilitate distribution of nonperishable foodstuffs. Based on an estimated[5] number of eligible children in the free lunch program, churches provide donated bags of food weighing approximately ten pounds and consisting generally of canned fruits and vegetables, pasta, rice, and dry beans as available. The school cafeterias distribute these bags on a weekly basis and children take them to their homes where they augment the diets of needy families in the larger Florence community. Santa Rosa in Andice specifically sponsors Florence Elementary School, while the Andice Baptist Church sponsors the High School, and Florence United Methodist sponsors the Middle School. The effort is cooperative and nondenominational, however, as food bags are pieced together from donations by all of the churches. The Church of Christ in Mahomet, for instance, provides supplies to both churches in Andice, as does the Baptist church in Briggs. Similarly, the churches in Florence are also combining efforts to fill bags delivered by Florence United Methodist to the Middle School.

These collaborative efforts are further assisted through ecclesiastical relationships with the Capital Area Food Bank of Texas, based in Austin. This nonprofit organization is largely reliant on donations from private individuals, philanthropic foundations, and businesses to include many supermarket chains, but also receives some food commodities through the USDA. Foods are distributed by the Food Bank to various areas in Central Texas at a small fee, charged by the pound, to cover the costs of transportation and handling. Church funds, maintained by weekly service offerings, are on hand to cover these costs, but many of the churches support benevolence funds through separate donations to purchase foods from the Capital Area Food Bank. Some of these foodstuffs go to fill bags delivered to the three schools in Florence proper, primarily through Santa Rosa in Andice, but the bulk of Capital Area Food Bank items are used to source traditional food pantries established at Briggs Baptist and the First Baptist of Florence Churches.

First Baptist opens its food pantry every other Monday, and in Briggs, every other Saturday. Although they are officially open for only a few hours, each provides food to approximately 150-200 families. Foods are disbursed in boxes that are filled based on family size and are meant to augment other means of obtaining food, but could

potentially support a family for five to seven days according to members at Briggs Baptist Church. Foods are given out based on availability, but generally include frozen meats, cheese, milk, eggs, fresh produce and an assortment of dry and canned goods. The entire process of receiving, sorting, and boxing is handled solely by church volunteers, but Briggs Baptist and First Baptist of Florence both receive help from neighboring churches in the study area. Beyond volunteering time and labor to this effort, members from the Church of Christ in Mohamet and Lawlor United Methodist Church are known to bring donated sundry items like toiletries, cleaning supplies, and food storage containers as these are unavailable through the Capital Area Food Bank and cannot be purchased with SNAP or WIC benefits. At the food pantry in Briggs, a widowed elderly woman who attends services at the Santa Rosa Catholic Church brings over one hundred store-bought loaves of bread each day the food pantry is opened and hands them out herself. Refrigeration and freezer units to store foods at both locations were also donated to support the food pantries.

Additionally, numerous churches execute their own Meals-on-Wheels programs, what many refer to as Grocery-on-Wheels to differentiate themselves from the national non-profit program dedicated to delivering foodstuffs directly to homebound individuals. Unlike Meals-on-Wheels, which charges a nominal fee to those who can afford it as a means of covering some of the costs of the food, the churches in the Florence area provide the service for free. This effort is very small, however, given the limited number of volunteers and the dispersion of the population in the area. It is far easier for these small churches to attract those in need to their locations, as through the food pantries. As such, the Andice Baptist Church has canceled traditional Wednesday services and activities in favor of a potluck dinner that they open to the public. People are asked to bring items to share, but are never turned away for any reason. According to the pastor, "there is no agenda, no meeting, just food and socialization between the church and the community." As many as 200 people have been estimated to attend these dinners, but there is no count of how many bring foods to share and how many do not. At Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the Fourth of July, the area churches combine efforts to make turkeys, hams, steaks and other traditional favorites available to the public at no cost. Donations to the respective benevolence funds cover these costs, and items are distributed from the church food pantries in Briggs and Florence.

In these ways, the churches in the larger Florence community have become distribution facilities and support centers supplied by giving individuals from within the local community and from organizations within Austin and the greater Central Texas region. Through the USDA and national supermarket chains like Kroger and Whole Foods that help supply the Capital Area Food Bank of Texas, these small rural churches and the larger Florence community are tied into a national and regional framework of providing food to those suffering from hunger and food insecurity. Further, via material and monetary donations, many Florence area churches sponsor secular organizations such as The Caring Place in Georgetown, The Knights of Columbus in Austin, and The Medina Children's Home located southwest of Austin, as a way of thanking the greater Austin Community for their support. The larger ecumenical Christian structure in the Florence area is thus a nexus of giving for the rural community, though that institutional network receives aid—and gives it—beyond the town's boundaries. In traditional geographical scholarship, most interpreters have assumed that rural areas sustain the urban areas via resources, but here, urban areas are giving some of their plenty to assist and improve the standard of living in a rural area. Churches, and most certainly other religious institutions not considered here, are powerful aspects of the complex inter-relationship between the two areas.

CONCLUSIONS

For scholars of U.S. religion, there is little new in noting the voluntary nature of religious organizations in America, especially the ways that those institutions shape and are shaped by political and economic structures (Ammerman, 1997; Chen and Lind, 2007). According to Warner (1993), the very basis of religious organizations in America is its progressive and voluntaristic nature, prompting him to cast religious communities as powerful vehicles of social change that empower the distressed and marginalized, enabling them to improve their quality of life. At the macro-cultural level he cites the civil rights movement, and even the gay rights movement, as evidence of the power of religious organization in America. Despite the American religious landscape's indisputable pluralism—embodied in our various churches, mosques, and temples, each representing different sects, ideologies, and ministries—some researchers (Harrison, 1967; Belcher et al., 2004) insist on couching religious voluntarism in terms of a conservative versus liberal dialectic in order to advance arguments in favor of state monopolized social welfare programs.

My observations of churches in the Florence area best compliment studies that support cooperative behavior among churches and secular organizations. Consider that although Chaves (2011) has found that religious Americans are more likely to be "politically and socially conservative" (p. 94), he did not identify a strong polarization between the religiously affiliated and the unaffiliated in America. Similarly, rather than expressing an interest in political issues among church members in the Florence area, the subjects I interviewed demonstrated a revulsion for contemporary and divisive political issues. The cooperative behavior of the churches also suggests the absence of sectarian divisions—at least among the variety of local Christians there—that might otherwise have hindered collective work toward countering the problem of hunger and food insecurity. Of course, there is little political debate about hunger and food insecurity, and a general compassion for those suffering such misfortune, as this brief study of the Florence area churches reveals. Still, it is worth noting that, as Chaves (2004) has stated, few American congregations are dedicated to social work, which he hypothesizes may be a potential consequence of secularization and the trend toward government-centered social service programs. Consequently, this study is incomplete without an appropriate comparison with church communities in larger urban settings as a means of qualifying and assessing the work being done by Florence area churches. It is further important to emphasize, as Wuthnow (2004) has argued, that churches cannot address the structural economic problems that result in poverty, the underlying cause of food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2011). They can only help to alleviate suffering, and, as community organizations, they are only effective at the local level where the problem is located.

If this research is of any value in a debate between the efficiency of state versus local social welfare programs, it is in understanding how church affiliations facilitate transregional and inter-institutional relationships. Though devoid of sufficient government and market services, the Florence area is nonetheless tied into the services benefiting a wider regional community, and through these transregional and inter-institutional linkages is able to benefit the situation of hundreds of people in need. The absence of government-dedicated hunger programs in the Florence area is no fault of government, since local, state, and federal governmental agencies are social organizations with limited resources and reach—a fact inherent to all organizations. Thus, the policy debate should not be based on an either-or paradigm, but on how to improve relationships between communities and among institutions. The state has a greater power to harness and direct resources, but cannot duplicate the bonds that community members form at local levels. Additionally, mid-level organizations like churches play a powerful role in linking national resources with the people who need them and should not be forgotten in our analyses of outreach activities.

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[2] City-data.com (2015) estimates that only approximately 40 percent of Florence is Hispanic, but does not take into account the surrounding areas.

[3] The assumption of Florence's market size is based on an interview of Vic's Grocery Store owner.

[4] Hadaway, Marler and Chaves (1993) found that this number, generally reported in the 40th percentile by national polling organizations, is typically at half of this self-reported figure, or 19.6 percent on average.

[5] Privacy concerns limit the schools from providing exact information on the number of needy children, and principals and teachers are apparently also denied access to this knowledge. The schools do provide the estimated numbers, however, ultimately leading to food assistance for approximately 400 families between the three schools.