

Faith in the City: Patrick McCrory and the Mayor's Mentoring Alliance

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Summary

In November 2003, Patrick McCrory became the first mayor of Charlotte to be elected for a fifth term. During his term in office, McCrory developed and championed the "Mayor's Mentoring Alliance," a cross-sector initiative aimed at helping at-risk youth in his city. Detailing McCrory's efforts to expand the cross-sector mentoring alliances, the case study raises strategic questions regarding how officials leverage limited public resources, form cross-sector partnerships with for-profit and nonprofit organizations, and assess the prospective liabilities and benefits of engaging a diverse faith community.

Teaching note overview

This case is about relationships between local government and the faith community. It could be used in a course or class sequence on urban politics, race relations, leadership, or partnership. It can be approached from the point of view of the mayor or of the leaders of religious communities. It provides an opportunity to explore the perspectives and interests of the various parties, and to analyze the conditions under which a mutually beneficial partnership might (or might not) be constructed.

The case ends with the mayor not having taken even the first step—of calling a meeting—toward involving the faith community in his mentoring alliance. One framing question for discussion is why this seems to be such a hard problem for the mayor, moving on to whether it is worth solving and, if so, how. Another way of framing the discussion is to start with the perspective of the faith community, especially the churches in the African American community, and ask about the pluses and minuses of participating, from their point of view. Then, one can move to the mayor's perspective and to the question of what might bring the interests of the two groups together.

What problem is posed?

According to the case, Charlotte was a city where gangs and drugs were having a significantly negative influence on minority youth. Moreover, minority youth in general were lagging behind their white counterparts in test scores. Everyone agreed that more had to be done for these young people. From a higher perspective, the problems affecting minority youth in Charlotte were tied to the larger issue of race relations in the city. From a political perspective, it was important that Mayor McCrory—whose base of support tended to be white suburbanites—build and strengthen his relationship with the African American community, specifically the religious leadership of this community, in addition to that of the predominantly white churches in the suburbs. To effectively address these issues and not alienate important partners, Mayor McCrory had to carefully navigate a terrain divided by race, class, religion, and even theological differences about government/faith community partnerships.

What solution is offered?

In response to the issues involved, Mayor McCrory initiated a mentoring alliance comprised of youth-serving organizations and representatives from local schools, businesses, and congregations. These partners, in turn, provided mentors to local at-risk youth. Given Charlotte's weak mayoral system, Mayor McCrory had to rely more on his informal authority

to convene partners and facilitate partnerships. In the process, he also had to work across race, class, and religious boundaries to bring together very different partners around a common goal: to better the life chances of minority youth in Charlotte, through the power of mentoring.

Case study questions to generate discussion

What are the mayor's motives and interests? Charlotte, North Carolina, has a city manager form of government, with a relatively weak mayor, who is elected to a two-year term. Patrick McCrory was elected to the office five times, after serving as a member of the city council. McCrory is a moderate Republican, who almost certainly has statewide or perhaps national ambitions. Charlotte, like many Southern cities, has annexed the suburban areas that in many northern cities would be self-governing political entities. McCrory was elected on a pro-growth platform; his base has been suburban whites, especially white evangelicals. He is perceived as pro-business; he is also perceived as supporting a new and more tolerant climate of race relationships in the city. His mentoring initiative was meant to contribute to better race relationships and to help bridge the achievement gap between white and black children in the city schools.

The mayor conceivably has several interests in reaching out to include the faith community in his mentoring initiative. Some of these interests are connected to the mentoring program; others are connected to the development of alliances with the faith community, for which the mentoring program is one means:

- **Recruiting more mentors.** The mentoring program has had some success in matching city children with mentors. However, the demand for mentors is much greater than the supply, which is currently coming primarily from corporations and nonprofit organizations. The churches are a potentially significant supplier of mentors, facilitating an expansion of the program. They are also in the position to assess the character of potential volunteers, thus to some extent serving a screening function for mentors from their communities.
- **Expanding his electoral appeal.** Success with the mentoring program might allow McCrory to expand his electoral appeal to minorities in the inner city. An alliance with the leadership of churches, especially with the leaders of black churches, might also broaden McCrory's appeal beyond his suburban base. In addition, a successful mentoring program might improve the academic achievement of the children who are mentored. This could result in a more attractive workforce for companies located in or considering Charlotte.
- **Improving the racial climate.** A successful mentoring program might help improve the racial climate in the city by reducing violence and gang activity among young people. This would be valuable in itself and might also contribute to an improved business climate. Involving the leaders of African American faith communities in a partnership with government might blunt some of their criticisms of the mayor and reduce some of their political opposition to him. An alliance that brought together faith communities from across the racial and ideological spectrum might improve the racial climate, by increasing understanding among the various groups.

What are the motives and interests of the faith community? In thinking about the motives and interests of the faith community, it is very important to understand the diversity of denominations and congregations in Charlotte. The interests of established African American churches, small African American store-front churches, integrated mainstream Protestant

churches, and white suburban evangelical mega-churches (to name only a few) are not likely to be identical. It can make sense to focus the discussion on the African American and white evangelical churches, but it is worth continually noting that they are only part of the picture.

The urban African American churches are of particular interest to the mayor, and are paramount in this case. Exploring the pluses and minuses of their signing on to the mayor's mentoring alliance is a good way of identifying their interests. Here, too, we can distinguish between the advantages and disadvantages of doing mentoring as part of an alliance, and those of participation in the alliance itself. To the extent that the churches have a social mission—a mission in the community—a mentoring program may be an apt manifestation of that mission. Mentoring is also likely to be good for the kids and good for the volunteers.

Participating in the alliance may give the participating churches access to governmental resources and people that they might not otherwise have. They may see the alliance as an opportunity to gain access to the mayor, in support of their social or economic agenda. The alliance may provide opportunities for members of the faith community to develop relationships and work with each other, with other community partners, and with the government. These relationships may strengthen the ability of the faith community to accomplish its broader mission. Running a good mentoring program is actually more complicated than it seems at first glance. The best programs have highly structured screening and selection procedures, training, and supervision.

The motives, interests, and challenges of the major "faith" players can be understood as follows:

- **Small congregations.** Small congregations especially may not have the capacity to operate this type of program alone. Participating in a mentoring alliance, though, may allow for sharing of resources and economies of scale in developing the infrastructure of the mentoring programs.
- **Urban churches.** The interests of urban churches are relatively clear: they serve the communities in which children most need mentors and have access to an adult community that offers a very scarce supply of mentors. In general, they see service to the community as an important aspect of their mission; they may also see racial reconciliation as part of their mission and as conducive to bettering the material lives of their members.
- **Suburban churches.** The interests of suburban churches are a bit harder to discern. Members of suburban churches, like the mayor, have an interest in the overall health of the city of Charlotte—in economic prosperity and racial peace. They may see or be persuaded to see participation in a mentoring alliance as contributing to their long-term self-interest. Mentoring may also help upgrade the overall quality of the workforce and an alliance of city and suburban churches may contribute to racial reconciliation and civic order.
- **Evangelical churches.** Evangelical churches usually have, not surprisingly, an evangelical mission. They may see participation in a mentoring program as an opportunity to witness to or even preach the gospel. Evangelical churches often have a conservative social agenda and, sometimes, a conservative economic agenda that they advocate through political channels. They may see participation in the alliance as a help in gaining access to the mayor in pursuit of this agenda. They may also see the alliance as a vehicle through which they can recruit others to support their social agenda.

There are clearly some areas in which the interests of the various parties converge—or could perhaps be brought to converge. There are other areas in which interests diverge. The big question and challenge for all parties is: can a strategy and structure can be developed that builds on common interests and manages divergent interests?

What are the best ways to improve outcomes for young people? All the parties have an interest in better outcomes—better academic performance, less criminal activity, and more responsible behavior—for the young people of the community. More specifically, the black community wants its children to succeed, and the white community and mayor generally want a better-prepared workforce and an orderly society.

Mentoring is one approach (though certainly not the only approach) to improving outcomes for young people. Assumptions about the effectiveness of mentoring programs can be challenged; so, too, can judgments about whether mentoring programs are the best way to use resources to improve outcomes for young people. (See the [Amachi](#) case for a summary of some of the evidence on effectiveness.) The best program evaluations of mentoring programs have been done by [Public Private Ventures](#) on Big Brothers Big Sisters programs. These evaluations suggest that positive results can be achieved by mentoring, under some circumstances. They do not suggest, however, that mentoring is the only or the best way to improve outcomes.

Mentoring is relatively cheap, as youth programs go, and can, therefore, be a cost-effective approach. It can also be a diversion from more expensive and potentially more effective investments in young people. Good mentoring programs are not, however, as cheap as they are often perceived to be. It is worth noting that the programs evaluated by Public Private Ventures are much more structured in terms of selection, training, and supervision of mentors than is apparent in the Charlotte program. The Amachi program, in many ways a model mentoring program, invests substantial resources in its infrastructure. One possible avenue for discussion, then, is whether the community ought to be putting so much hope in a relatively unstructured mentoring program, if there are more effective, though undoubtedly more costly, interventions that should be advocated for.

How do race relations fit in? The overriding issue in Charlotte, as in many cities around the country, may well be race relations. Though the city is becoming more ethnically diverse as it attracts and becomes home to new immigrants, the black-white divide is still its most important demographic reality. The city needs a well-prepared workforce to attract the businesses it is after; so it needs well-prepared young people of all ethnic groups. It also needs to be perceived as a city where racial disturbances will not happen, and where the inner city is safe, orderly, and inviting. Just as all parties in the city have an interest in better outcomes for young people, they also have an interest in good race relations.

The mayor's political base has been mostly white and mostly suburban. He has an interest in expanding his political base into the city, but cannot afford to alienate the suburbs. Thus, as he pursues racial reconciliation, he needs to be careful not to favor one constituency over another. The goal of racial reconciliation can be served by bringing the various groups together around common interests. This makes the expansion of the mentoring alliance an attractive strategy for the mayor. However, it also makes for a difficult problem. He needs to involve the whole diversity of faith communities, across ethnic and ideological divides, and he needs to involve them almost simultaneously. Figuring out how to do this has proven very time-consuming. Devising tactics here could be a profitable direction for class discussion.

What about the issue of evangelizing? One of the reasons for involving churches in mentoring programs is to gain access to a pool of potentially motivated and committed volunteers whose connection to a church arguably testifies to their character. But, it must be recognized that for many volunteers recruited in this way their motivation is religious and perhaps evangelical. If church leaders are involved in nominating potential volunteers, as they formally are in the Amachi program, the screening criteria they use may well be religious. Moreover, church people may believe that the key element in a successful mentoring program is character education, spirituality, or religion. Thus, the issue of evangelization needs to be faced, even if only trivial amounts of public money or support are involved. It is especially important to think about if mentors from one faith community (for example, suburban evangelicals) are matched with children from another community.

The Amachi program addresses this issue by being very clear in its training and supervision of mentors: they are not to explicitly evangelize. Religious motivation is fine; witnessing through example is fine; answering questions about religion in a neutral way is fine; advocating good character traits and ethical and responsible behaviors is fine; proselytizing is not fine. The lines here, of course, are somewhat blurry, and the guidelines may be impossible to enforce. Nevertheless, designers of these programs and students who analyze them need to at least confront the issue and think about design parameters that protect the religious freedom of the children and their families.

What about the issues of political advocacy and dialogue? The mayor's interest in the mentoring alliance is unquestionably political, at least in part. The diverse faith communities also have an interest in advancing their own political and policy agendas, and may weigh their ability to use the mentoring alliance toward that end in their calculus of whether or not to participate. To encourage participation, the mayor probably needs to make clear that he does not expect or want political conformity or support as a condition of participation in the alliance. He may want to use the alliance as a way to increase political dialogue and hear all points of view. At the same time, he needs to be very careful about not favoring one political group over others. Clarity about all these issues and transparent processes will be important in structuring the alliance to meet all parties' needs.

The issue of community participation in the process of structuring the alliance is also likely to be very salient. The alliance is meant to serve—to help—the poor, mostly minority communities within the city. Especially if suburban churches become vital sources of mentors, it will be very important that the program not be seen as something that the privileged community is doing in charity for the less fortunate. The best way to avoid this is with a design process that focuses on and includes the communities.