Congregations as Changemakers in Community

When we think about organizations driving transformational change in communities, we often picture nonprofits, government agencies, or philanthropy. But there is another type of institution, one that has been deeply embedded in the fabric of communities, that deserves far more attention as a vehicle for lasting, grassroots transformation: local congregations.

As part of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas (EDOT), EHF has been working closely with congregations for over a decade to improve the health of Texans living within the 81-county Diocese. Over time, it has become clear that congregations possess a unique and often underestimated combination of assets that make them well-positioned to lead community change. While EHF's learnings are grounded in the experience and efforts of our Episcopal partners, they may offer insights relevant to other faith communities and faith-based organizations.

A Built-In Network of People Who Want to Help

Congregations offer something that is genuinely difficult to manufacture: a pre-existing, self-selected network of individuals who share values, trust one another, and are oriented toward service. This is not incidental to their function, it is central to it. Members show up week after week not because they are required to, but because they are motivated by a shared sense of purpose and genuine desire to contribute to something larger than themselves.

Most organizations spend enormous resources trying to recruit, motivate, and retain people who are committed to their mission. Congregations begin with that foundation already in place. The result is a community of individuals who are primed to act, ready to give, and deeply connected to the neighborhoods they live in.

Financial Independence That Enables Bold Action

A recurring challenge in community-change work is the time-gap between when needs arise and when resources become available. Grant cycles, funder priorities, and compliance requirements all introduce friction that slows response time and constrains action.

Congregations largely operate outside of this dynamic. Because they are self-sustaining and independently funded through their own membership, they do not wait for external approval to make decisions to sustain their internal ministries. When a community need surfaces, a congregation can respond on its own timeline, according to its own values, without navigating the bureaucratic structures that often slow institutional responses.

However, membership-based resources alone do not provide full sustainability for achieving wider community-level impact. To be fully self-sustainable in their community-wide impact, congregations need expanded partner networks and targeted capacity building. This is where EHF's capacity building work can be especially valuable. It helps move congregations from transactional acts of service toward transformational change.

Through this lens, congregations can be particularly effective in crisis response and rapid-cycle community support, contexts where speed and flexibility matter most. Their independence makes them valuable assets in those settings, but it also opens an area of learning for funders and community partners: how to structure relationships with congregations in ways that leverage their independence and flexibility while also building the collaborative capacity and networks needed for sustained, community-wide impact.

The Power of Volunteer Infrastructure

The volunteer structure inherent to most faith communities means that congregations can mobilize people, time, and skills at a scale that would be cost-prohibitive for most organizations to replicate. Volunteers in congregational settings are not strangers to the community; they are neighbors, parents, teachers, and business owners who have trusted relationships with the people they serve. That relational capital translates directly into more effective, more dignified, and more sustainable community support.

Leaders Who Are Already Aligned Around Change

Congregations are not just filled with willing volunteers; they are often led by individuals who deliberately organize their communities around specific areas of need. Faith leaders step into roles as community advocates, coalition builders, and systems-change champions, taking a lead in broader community transformation.

Food and nutrition security is a powerful example because it sits at the intersection of health, community, and equity. Congregations have long operated food pantries and meal programs, but increasingly, faith leaders are going further – asking harder questions about why hunger persists and organizing their communities to address root causes, not just symptoms. Similarly, the Call to Feed the Hungry is an organizing campaign centered around empowering congregations, community organizations, and individuals to drive system-level impact through policy and legislative change.

Real-World Examples: What This Looks Like in Practice

The Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty

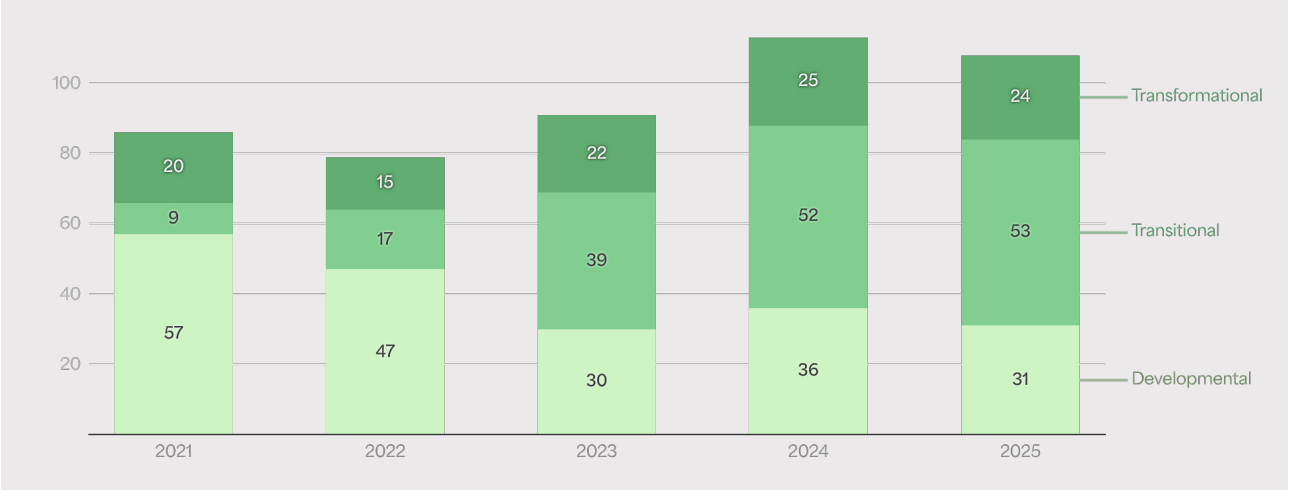
Congregations in Galveston County and in the Bryan area with food ministries through EHF became connected with the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty. In this work, they are transforming their food ministries from primarily grassroots efforts serving immediate needs, to more upstream movement and actions by developing multi-sector community partnerships and learning advocacy skills. With these new tools and growth in their understanding of the food system, they are connecting the stories and experiences of the people they serve to inform and shape local and state policy efforts.

Capacity to Engage with Community

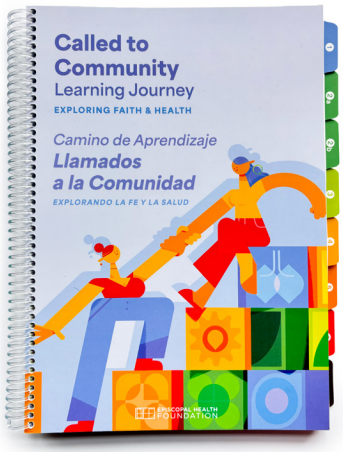
As part of their engagement with EHF, congregations are assessed using the Community Engagement Capacity (CEC) Ratings, a tool designed to measure each congregation's capacity to develop or meaningfully transform their community ministries. Over the last five years, more congregations have deepened engagement with their communities. Notably, the number of congregations at the transitional stage has increased from 9 to 53, meaning that more congregations are moving from incremental change toward

sustained transformation. The data suggest that when congregations are equipped with the right tools, relationships, and support structures, they deepen and expand their role as changemakers within their communities, as well as in policy change. Furthermore, the long-term, non-linear nature of capacity-building impact is reflected in smaller, slower shifts within the work moving toward transformation.

CEC Ratings 2021-2025



Called to Community Learning Journey



As part of EHF's efforts to empower more congregations to work at the transformational level, the Called to Community Learning Journey aims to inspire, educate, and motivate congregations to engage in ministry and outreach activities that build healthier communities. Through this self-facilitated Learning Journey, congregations gain exposure to and deeper understanding of Non-Medical Drivers of Health (NMDOH), building the knowledge and shared language needed to drive meaningful change at the community level.

Leveraging Partnerships with Congregations to Achieve Transformational Change

The more closely we examine what drives community change, the more clearly congregations emerge as a critical factor to deep, sustainable transformation. Their networks, volunteer infrastructure, leadership, independence, and trust within the community represent a combination of assets that are truly powerful. They are not peripheral to community change. In many communities, they are its core.

For funders, policymakers, and community leaders looking to drive lasting impact, the question should not be whether to engage congregations; it should be how to build partnerships, frameworks, and learning systems that allow us to understand congregational impact more deeply, support it more effectively, and scale it more intentionally.