



The Open Table **An Authentic Partnership of Faith, and Government, and Individuals in Need**

Introduction. Government and faith communities can work together and successfully address complex human service problems. This paper describes a model, The Open Table, which demonstrates how a detailed, structured, collaborative approach can transform the lives of people beset by poverty and other difficult life challenges. This paper not only defines roles of government and faith, but also shows how this partnership can be successful when so many past government and faith community efforts have not resulted in significant, enduring change. It considers the role of government and faith community funding, the cost and the value that ensues from these essential partnerships

The benefits of Open Table are substantial for those who are served by Tables, including creation of a network of supportive friends to make enduring improvements in jobs, relationships, and community success. Research has shown that not only are the lives of persons in poverty transformed, but so are many of the people who serve as Members of Tables. They gain a new appreciation for the challenges experienced by many people in their community, and they have a newfound commitment to serving those in need. This enduring work by members of the faith community, when done in partnership with government, can have a transformative impact on the way that poverty and other live challenges are dealt with in communities.

Background. Who is responsible for changing the lives of those who are burdened by poverty, marginalized by judgment from others or who are experiencing other life disadvantages? In the United States, and in most developed countries, government programs are available to help the poor, those with disabilities, addiction, and family or community safety needs. These government “safety net” human service programs are well intended, but the people who work in them are often frustrated because their best efforts do not result in substantive change for the majority of people they serve.

Long before government programs were established, the needs of the poor and disadvantaged were embraced by faith communities. Faith communities teach the principle of charity as a core mission. We now see an extraordinary number of soup kitchens, clothing banks, counseling programs, and other efforts whereby the faith community extends help to the needy in communities throughout America. Despite all of these efforts, poverty and social problems persist at a deeply troubling, and growing magnitude in virtually every community in the nation.

Even when government and faith have worked together, the results have been modest at best. These efforts have been based on a model of transactional involvement (providing goods and services), which provides short-term support and can actually serve as a way to ensure dependence on system supports. A new approach is needed where government, faith communities, and those in need work together in an equality-based partnership to establish meaningful, sustainable change. Collaboration through The Open Table provides that new, transforming approach.

The History of Open Table. The Open Table (<http://www.theopentable.org>) began when a homeless man in Arizona asked a congregation if he could worship at their church. This initiated a relationship where members of the congregation began to identify how they could use their knowledge and their contacts to enable the man to escape homelessness and poverty. The man's life was transformed and those who provided the support found themselves and their view of poverty changed by their relationship with the man. This experience led to the formation in 2007 of The Open Table, a 501c3 nonprofit organization that trains congregations and their members to form communities - called Tables - that utilize their vocational and life experiences as tools that individuals in poverty can use to develop and implement plans to change their lives. Open Table has worked with Table Members from faith communities in over 20 states and has transformed the lives of hundreds of individuals and families (called Brothers or Sisters). Addressing poverty remains one of the core features, but the movement has also have served young adults (many transitioning from foster care), persons with HIV/AIDS, individuals leaving incarceration, and youth with mental health or other human service system involvement, and other populations.

The Theory of Change for Open Table. The following are the five core non-negotiable elements of Open Table, without which outcomes are unlikely to be achieved:

1. Relationship. Open Table is about a faith community being in direct relationship with those in poverty. The relationships between Table members and the Sister and/or Brother is at the heart of the effectiveness of the model, and the ability of the Sister and/or Brother to establish long lasting relationships with their Table and with other members of the community is crucial to success.

2. Faith and a shared purpose. Through a shared purpose, a faith community builds a powerful understanding of the human potential of each and every individual, and of how to actualize true love for each other through mutual and humble service. Through expression and deepening of their individual faith/spiritual perspectives, Table members and sisters/brothers affirm and deepen their own sense of wholeness, and of their connected humanity and shared purpose on the Table.

3. A Safe Place. A community creates Tables as a way of understanding that community and personal judgment may have contributed to poverty. We have to create a safe place for a community and Tables to recognize that poverty is not about character but rather about experience. We have to create a safe place to support a sister/brother as they move out of poverty. The safe place is free from blame and shame, moves at the own pace of the

sister/brother, and is based on the sister's/brother's own definition of success, culture, and support.

4. Transformation and Reconciliation. Transformation occurs when a community is released from preconceived notions of poverty, people in poverty, and poverty solutions, including transaction-based interventions. We understand the mutuality, which is built through being in direct, face-to-face, and long-term relationship with those in poverty. As the community moves into mutual, direct relationship to those who are in poverty, reconciliation between races, social groups, and families begins to occur and transformation builds a mutual community sharing of an abundance of heart, spirit, and of intellectual and social capital. This shift forever abandons the paternalistic, dependent model of change and reveals the opportunity to be healed by each other

5. Local determination and ownership. The Open Table model provides a foundational, consistent, tested, and proven process for addressing poverty, and provides training for communities. However -- exactly how the community of business, non-profits, government and faith sectors form into a local movement, how expansion, focus on populations, and how the effort and scope proceeds are all locally determined and managed as part of a community vision of their system of care under a shared purpose. Faith communities are the implementers of Open Table at the sister/brother level and make final determinations at the model level.

Outcomes. Studies have shown impressive outcomes of the Open Table Model. A recent longitudinal study found that 95% of young adults and families served by Open Table maintained a long term relationship with their Table members, and 85% of the graduates had a better job and/or were in a college or technical school a year after their Table experiences ended. In addition, 85% indicated that they have the skills needed to get through problems and crises better than before, and perhaps most tellingly, 95% indicated that they are currently self-supporting or confident that they will be self-supporting in the future.

Why does Open Table succeed where previous government and faith community efforts have not? The answer is that Open Table is a reciprocal partnership between individuals in need and faith community members. Table members are not giving food, money, or "stuff" to someone as a hand out. Rather, they are joining in a relationship where they are helping and supporting persons in poverty (called Brothers and Sisters in most Open Table efforts) to take action that will dramatically change their lives. The Table members are acting as friends, identifying resources, giving hope and encouragement through their time and intellectual capital. What is created are enduring relationships which can lift someone permanently out of poverty.

While most of the efforts to date have been directly managed through faith communities working alone, demonstrations are showing that the benefits can be exponentially better when Government and local human service agencies collaborate with faith communities through the Open Table model. Government and local agencies can identify and prepare those in need, provide basic services, and support the faith community. However, most government agencies do not have the resources to establish the extensive, long-term relationships that many people need to permanently get out of poverty.

The helping professions have recognized the necessity of formal systems being bolstered by natural supports. Individualized planning processes such as person centered planning, high fidelity wraparound, restorative justice, and family group decision making have greatly expanded in the human services field. In the health care field, patient-centered care has become the new standard. These approaches are based on the concepts of individual responsibility and control, collaborative efforts of government programs, and use of natural supports such as family and friends. Building on this evolving human service technology, Open Table provides an established, proven model for government and faith communities to move beyond the transactional provision of goods and services to the transformational process resulting in real and enduring change in people's lives.

The Theoretical Basis for the Model. Open Table is a highly structured process which uses research-based techniques and tools to harness the charitable impulses, the experiences, and the knowledge of faith community volunteers. Though developed independently, Open Table is structured in similar fashion to many human services evidence based practices. It is based on a theory of change, it utilizes standardized assessment and it has a manualized training and coaching process. It is also carefully monitored to assure fidelity to the model.

The theoretical foundation of Open Table builds on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1970), Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977), and the Wraparound philosophy of integrating plans, services, and supports across the family and community (Bruns, et. al., 2004). The process of Open Table helps individuals meet their basic needs by strengthening social networks through relationships with individuals and sustainable community supports. This strategy enhances the individual's belief that they can create a successful future.

The theory of Human Ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emphasizes the importance of social influences on human development and functioning, and is consistent with Open Table approaches. Subsequent research studies demonstrated that individuals with strong natural support systems are healthier, happier, and have more positive outcomes than individuals with fewer natural supports. Building upon Human Ecology theory, Open Table integrates new social service "technologies" that foster decision making and self-determination. Open Table utilizes a psychometrically sound strengths based psychological assessment process for identifying and testing an individual's assets and interests with a small trusting support community (the Table). The assessment and the establishment of the trusting relationship pave the way for broader successes in the individual's work and social life. The long-term commitment of Table Members helps to weather the inevitable challenges that occur in the transformation process.

Specific Organizational Aspects of Open Table. Open Table is a 501c3 nonprofit training organization that licenses its poverty transformation model to faith communities and trains them to implement the model. Individuals who are supported by the Open Table process do not have to practice a religion, nor belong to any faith community. Faith is discussed at the Table only when a Brother or Sister requests it. Often, Table members say their faith journey and purpose deepen through the Table experience. The Open Table Model is a non-judgmental, non-blaming, and "never-giving-up" approach to help individuals deal with difficult life circumstances.

Open Table has a small centralized national training infrastructure, but it has a sophisticated operational process, including a readiness assessment model and on-line training developed by individuals with extensive training experience. Open Table trains and monitors fidelity to the model, and to the principles on which the model is based. Congregations purchase a license that provides standardization, and reflects their commitment to the model. Furthermore, an on-going evaluation process enables Open Table to continually improve its training operations.

Open Table links faith communities with an organization which, in agreement and cooperation with the implementing faith community, conducts readiness assessments to help assure that Brothers/Sisters are prepared to effectively utilize the benefits of Open Table. The organization uses a validated series of instruments to assess the needs of the individual being served. The model provides training in confidentiality for all individuals involved in the Open Table process.

The Economic Benefits of the Model. It is informative to consider the extraordinary level of support that is made available to Brothers/Sisters that enables them to make dramatic, transformative changes in their lives. The true value of Open Table comes from the relationships that are established, the emotional support that is provided, and the extensive connections that are made with community resources. These intangible benefits cannot be fully quantified. However, it is possible to quantify the contribution of time from the volunteers of the Faith Community that serve as Members of Tables:

The number of Members serving on a Table ranges between 6 and 10. Using 8 as an average, and calculating that each Table meets for 1.5 hours 48 times a year, there are 576 direct volunteer hours for each Brother/Sister served. In addition, there are another 130 hours contributed by Table Members and Mission Leaders in the extensive training required by Open Table. Using \$23.07 as an hourly value (the latest estimate by Independent Sector of the value of a volunteer hour) results in over \$16,000 worth of personal support for every single individual served by a Table. In addition, there are donated goods and services (attorney, accountant, car, mechanic, accountant, dentist, childcare, etc.) arranged for Brothers/Sisters by their Table Members. Open Table is successful because of the extraordinary investment of time, energy, and caring of Table Members.

Costs of Implementing Open Table. As with any training organization, there is significant personnel time and work products involved in bringing the Open Table model to a community. There are two components to the cost for Open Table, the cost to faith community and the cost to government and/or community organizations. For the faith community, there is an annual licensure fee of \$500 per congregation (\$1,000 for large congregations), and the individuals that serve as members of Tables also have skin in the game and pay a small fee of \$10 per month. These funds support initial development as well as on-going support for Tables.

In addition, there is “seed capital” cost (often provided by government) during the first two years to engage and train the new collaborative system, develop a demonstration project, and support the collaboration to expand Tables. Like the implementation of other new systems, the initial year of an Open Table project is focused on faith-government relationship and infrastructure building. This development work includes:

- At least two extended site visits to train the partnership to launch an initial demonstration project,

- Outreach and orientation for government faith communities, Community Exploration(s) where faith and government leaders are trained in the model and develop an initial community plan,
- Training a government and faith coordinator to co-manage the process,
- Training of coordinators in each congregation (Mission Leaders) to recruit, launch and expand Tables, Presentations to recruit Table members,
- Training Table members in the Open Table model (often in collaboration with government partners),
- Providing a year of launch training and technical support to licensed congregations as they learn to implement a structured model,
- A structured process to receive referrals from government partners that also employs an evidence based assessment model,
- Facilitation of the ongoing development of the faith-government process and other community partners, and
- Development and support for implementation of a year two plan.

The long-term benefit of faith/government partnerships in communities. The remarkable transformation that can occur when government partners with the faith community through Open Table is evidenced by the facts that:

- The amount of resources (money, volunteers, social and intellectual capital) available to address difficult community problems is exponentially increased;
- Faith communities develop an infrastructure whereby individual congregations as well as groupings of congregations become focused on addressing the cause of complex problems through a well-defined and tested model;
- The broader community (foundations, corporations, social clubs) becomes involved through the faith community;
- Information sharing occurs as government and the faith community efforts engage the traditional media and social media, leading to growing community-wide commitment to working together;
- Strategic collaborations are developed bringing together government, faith communities, philanthropy, human service organizations, social clubs, and corporations to apply structured, measureable efforts to address complex community problems.

The Open Table staff, volunteers, and consultants have considerable experience developing partnerships at the federal, state, county and local levels, including government-faith partnerships with SAMHSA, county systems of care in Florida, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia. Jon Katov, the founder and CEO of Open Table serves to manage and direct the organization, and has worked extensively with faith leaders, communities and government agencies around the U.S. Dr. John VanDenBerg, former children's mental health director in two states, and a pioneer of the Wraparound Process, serves as a consultant to the Open Table board and to the CEO. Dr. Stan Mrozowski, former head of Children's Mental Health for the state of Pennsylvania, consults with Open Table on the full scope of government partnerships. Other Open Table consultants and staff bring additional support to the faith/government relationship.

Communities that implement Open Table in partnership with Government experience a transformation whereby there is a deeper understanding of the roles of government and the faith community and a profound appreciation of how the two sectors can work together to solve deeply entrenched problems in their community. The efforts of each sector are magnified such that the Open Table model grows to make a significant impact on the community. One by one, the cycle of poverty and despair is broken and this success spurs the development of more Tables and more cooperation between government and faith communities. In the words of one community which has experienced Open Table transformation, "...the long-term relationship between government and the faith community has priceless value."