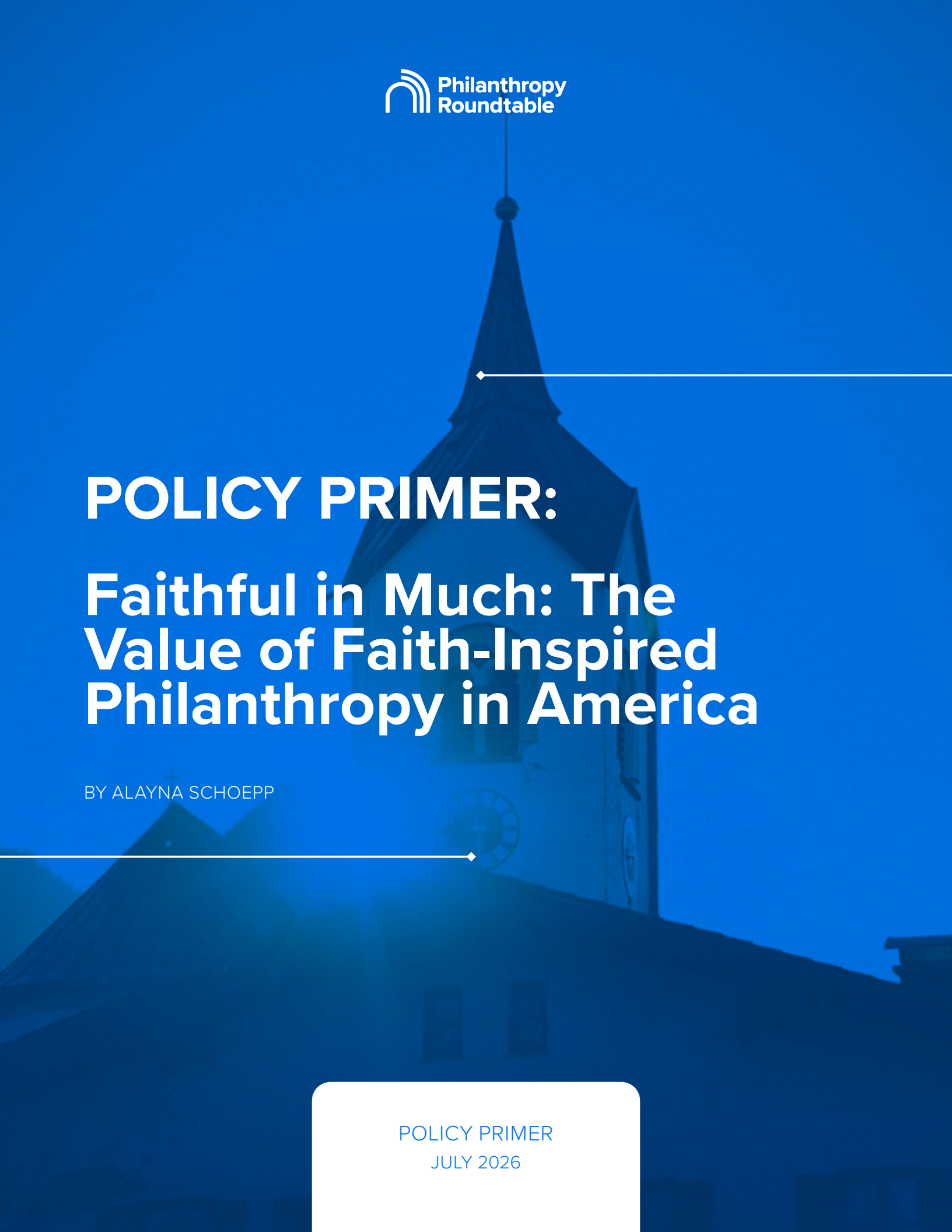




POLICY PRIMER:

Faithful in Much: The Value of Faith-Inspired Philanthropy in America

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At its core, philanthropy is an expression of values. Every philanthropic institution is shaped by its defining purpose, guiding principles and charitable priorities. While philanthropy can be categorized in many ways, one of the most important distinctions lies in the beliefs and motivations that inspire charitable action.

Among the traditions that have shaped American philanthropy, faith stands as one of the most enduring and influential forces. For generations, faith-based conviction has motivated individuals and families to establish charitable institutions, support their communities and invest in causes they believe will strengthen society and improve the lives of others.

Faith-based philanthropy remains a significant force within the American charitable landscape. Yet its influence extends well beyond support for houses of worship or explicitly religious organizations. Faith has played a central role in the development of the nation's nonprofit sector, inspired generations of philanthropists and continues to drive substantial private investment in education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, disaster relief and countless other causes. Understanding this tradition provides important context for appreciating the historical foundations of American civil society and the enduring importance of values-driven philanthropy today.

This brief explores the historical roots of faith-based organizations in the United

States, examines their lasting contributions to American society and highlights the vital support faith-inspired donors and foundations continue to provide. Together, these examples illustrate why faith remains

one of the most influential motivations for charitable giving and why it continues to function as a powerful catalyst for strengthening communities and advancing the common good.

FAITH AS A DEFINING FORCE IN AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY:

Faith has shaped American philanthropy and charitable traditions since the nation's founding. For many of the country's earliest European settlers, the desire to practice their faith freely was a [primary motivation](#) for crossing the Atlantic and establishing new communities.

Emerging from this faith-oriented culture, the [founders'](#) ideas about society, government and civic life were shaped, to varying degrees, by the beliefs and moral traditions of their time. Some, such as Roger Sherman and Patrick Henry, professed a more traditional Christian faith. Others, such as John Adams and George Washington, expressed broader or less doctrinal faith convictions.

Although the founders held diverse theological views, many believed religion and morality played an essential role in sustaining a free society. These convictions influenced the principles and institutions they established, helping shape the nation's early understanding of civic responsibility.

Following the nation's founding, many of its leaders continued to emphasize the importance of religion in American civic life. In his [farewell address](#), President George Washington wrote, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."

Washington viewed religion and morality as critical bulwarks of civic virtue and the preservation of free government.

Similarly, in his treatise "[Democracy in America](#)," Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "There is no country in the whole world in which the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America."

As an outside observer, Tocqueville likewise recognized the significant role religion played in shaping the character, values and civic habits of the American people. From the nation's earliest years, this influence helped shape America's founding ideals and the development of its civil society, including its traditions of charity and philanthropy.

This background of American faith sets the framework for understanding how it became such a significant motivation for charitable giving throughout American history. [Most charitable organizations](#) in America in the 1700s originated from churches and were inspired by faith-based convictions. By the 1800s, philanthropy had begun to expand beyond individual congregations as new charitable institutions and voluntary associations emerged. Even as philanthropy became more organized, many of its leading advocates were motivated by the faith-based convictions strengthened during the Great Awakenings.



Religious communities and faith-motivated individuals played [influential roles](#) advancing causes such as abolitionism, women's suffrage and later civil rights efforts, demonstrating the enduring influence of faith on American civic engagement.

Throughout American history, faith has remained a powerful source of charitable action. While the forms of philanthropy have evolved over time, faith-based convictions have consistently inspired Americans to serve their neighbors, strengthen their communities and contribute to the common good.

THE ENDURING INFLUENCE OF FAITH ON AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

Although the inspirations for American philanthropy have evolved over time, faith continues to play a defining role in charitable giving and nonprofit service. Faith-based conviction remains a powerful motivator of generosity, while faith-based organizations continue to be among the nation's most significant providers of community support and essential social services.

Faith inspires charitable giving at every level, from large private foundations to individual donors. According to *Giving USA*, as [reported](#) by JMT Consulting Group, approximately 31% of charitable giving in 2017 was directed to religious organizations. However, this figure excludes many faith-

based organizations that provide broader community services, such as hospitals, schools and social service agencies.

A separate analysis by *Connected to Give*, based on 2012 household giving data, found that [73%](#) of charitable dollars supported either congregations (41%) or religiously affiliated organizations (32%). This suggests the overall role of faith-inspired organizations in American philanthropy is substantially larger than traditional giving categories indicate.

Private philanthropy likewise reflects the continued influence of faith. [A 2022 Aspen Institute report](#) analyzing 2018 data found that approximately 28% of private foundations in the U.S. were faith-based, collectively managing more than \$177 billion in assets and distributing over \$9 billion in charitable grants that year alone. Together, these figures demonstrate that faith remains a significant driver of philanthropic investment in communities across the country.

Faith also continues to shape the organizations that carry out charitable work. Estimates of the faith-based nonprofit sector vary depending on how it is defined. In his analysis of religious organizations within the nonprofit sector, sociologist Brad R. Fulton estimates that approximately [15%](#) of nonprofits operating in nonreligious fields use religious language in their names or missions, demonstrating the broad presence of faith-based organizations across sectors such as education, healthcare and human services.

When explicitly religious organizations including congregations and other religious institutions are also included, some scholars estimate faith-based organizations account for [a third or more](#) of all nonprofits in the United States. Regardless of the precise figure, faith-based organizations represent

a substantial share of America's charitable landscape and remain deeply embedded in communities nationwide.

The impact of faith-based nonprofits extends well beyond their numbers. [Research](#) by Jeri Eckhart Queenan, Peter Grunert and Devin Murphy found faith-based organizations provide approximately 40% of safety-net spending across a sample of six U.S. cities. This figure excludes assistance provided directly by local congregations and therefore likely understates their overall contribution.

Similarly, the late Karl Zinsmeister [reported](#) that religious hospitals care for one in five hospital patients, while Catholic institutions hold 16% of U.S. hospital beds. Additionally, faith-based organizations were responsible for as many as 58% of emergency shelter beds across 11 surveyed cities in 2017. Earlier [research](#) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services likewise found faith-based organizations accounted for more than half of food assistance programs and approximately one-quarter of housing programs nationwide.

These findings underscore the enduring role of faith in American philanthropy. Faith-inspired organizations not only represent a significant share of the charitable sector, but they also provide many of the essential services that strengthen families and communities. Their long-standing presence, trusted relationships and deep local roots often position them to meet needs in ways that are effective and enduring. More than two centuries after the nation's founding, faith continues to shape the generosity of American donors and the institutions translating that generosity into lasting community impact.



VALUES-ALIGNED PHILANTHROPY STRENGTHENS CIVIL SOCIETY

A defining characteristic of American philanthropy is the freedom of donors to pursue charitable goals consistent with their convictions and values. A strategic, values-based approach allows individuals, families and foundations to support the causes they believe will have the greatest impact while fostering a flourishing civil society dedicated to liberty, opportunity and personal responsibility.

Values-aligned philanthropy recognizes that effective giving is not simply a matter of distributing resources but of investing in organizations whose missions, methods and long-term goals reflect a donor's deepest convictions. When donors support organizations that share their values, they are better positioned to sustain those institutions over time and help them pursue lasting solutions to social challenges.

Faith-based philanthropy offers a compelling example of this principle in practice. Foundations such as The Rees-Jones Foundation and Connelly Foundation exemplify how enduring faith-inspired convictions can shape strategic, long-term investments in education, community development, religious institutions and human flourishing.

By preserving donors' freedom to support organizations aligned with their beliefs, American philanthropy strengthens the diversity, independence and resilience of civil society. Rather than concentrating charitable decision making in a single institution or ideology, values-aligned giving enables a diversity of approaches to addressing society's greatest challenges.

THE REES-JONES FOUNDATION

OVERVIEW

Motivated by gratitude for the resources they believed God had entrusted to them and a desire to steward those resources faithfully, Jan and Trevor Rees-Jones founded The Rees-Jones Foundation in 2006. Faith is central to the foundation's mission, guided by the conviction: "We do what we do in response to what He has done for us." Inspired by the personal stories they encountered of individuals, especially children, living without access to even the

most basic forms of care, The Rees-Jones Foundation committed to improving the lives of vulnerable families.

Today, the foundation pursues its mission to "defend the welfare and improve the quality of life of children and families in tangible ways" by supporting organizations across a broad range of issue areas. These areas include child welfare, disability care, evangelism and discipleship, youth development and other initiatives that strengthen individuals, families and communities.

MISSION AND GRANTMAKING STRATEGY

Much of The Rees-Jones Foundation's philanthropic activity focuses on northern Texas, especially the Dallas-Fort Worth area. However, it also contributes significantly to various international organizations. Its international support specifically goes to Christian nonprofits working in development, disability care and justice.

According to Impala, a philanthropic data platform that analyzes publicly available

grantmaking data, The Rees-Jones Foundation has made at least 3,076 grants totaling more than \$884 million over its 20-year history. From 2020 to 2024, [approximately one-third](#) of the foundation's annual giving has been allocated toward faith-based grantees. This represents about \$18.7 million in grants each year, highlighting the fundamental role faith plays in its values-based giving.

ILLUSTRATIVE FAITH-BASED INVESTMENTS

The Rees-Jones Foundation has committed significant funding to faith-based organizations, generating lasting impact across its focus areas through

long-term partnerships with its grantees. Supporting thriving individuals, families and local communities is one of the central tenets of the foundation's mission, and its

long-term investments have strengthened organizations working to improve lives across these areas.

For example, one of The Rees-Jones Foundation's key grantees is Young Life, a nonprofit dedicated to bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to youth. The Foundation supports Young Life's work primarily in the Dallas-Fort Worth region, having given over [\\$10.8 million in funding](#) to their youth ministry and discipleship programs since 2016. The foundation also supports Texas-based nonprofits like Buckner Children and Family Services, which provides faith-based social service programs to vulnerable children across the state—most notably its foster care and adoption services.

While passionate about place-based philanthropy, The Rees-Jones Foundation also plays a significant role funding international humanitarian efforts. For example, it supports Living Water International, a faith-based nonprofit that focuses on providing access to clean

physical water and spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. According to the foundation, it has made 24 grants totaling \$33 million to this organization since 2016.

Similarly, according to The Rees-Jones Foundation, it has given at least 27 grants totaling around \$52 million over the last 10 years to Cure International, a Christian nonprofit that operates children's hospitals in Africa and the Philippines and provides medical services in 24 countries. The Rees-Jones Foundation has also long supported the International Justice Mission (IJM), an international nonprofit dedicated to combating human trafficking and modern slavery.

Since 2016, the foundation has reported making at least 18 grants totaling more than \$76 million in support of IJM's work. All these examples provide evidence of the significant resources The Rees-Jones Foundation has devoted to meeting the needs of the local and international community through enduring partnerships with its grantees.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Regardless of whether its funding is local, national or international, The Rees-Jones Foundation demonstrates a clear dedication to its founding values of stewardship and loving service. Its consistent and intentional

support demonstrates a deep devotion to sharing the love of God with others and allowing faith to serve as the foundation for its generosity.

CONNELLY FOUNDATION

OVERVIEW

While not exclusively faith-based, the Connelly Foundation is another excellent example of a foundation whose faith guides its intentional investment in supporting Catholic schools and causes throughout its community. Inspired by their Catholic faith, John and Josephine Connelly established the foundation out of a passion for sharing the success of their business ventures by blessing communities in the Philadelphia region.

Characterized by a personal approach to giving, the couple started writing checks

as they became aware of needs around them, demonstrating a spirit of kindness and generosity in supporting their community. Now in the fourth generation since its founding, the Connelly family distinguishes itself by remaining committed to preserving John and Josephine's original vision and intent.

The current president of the foundation and grandson of John and Josephine, Tom Riley, developed a strategic plan to firmly establish its founding vision while maximizing impact in its current and future grantmaking.

MISSION AND GRANTMAKING STRATEGY

The foundation is committed to investing in organizations that promote cultural, economic, social and intellectual flourishing for individuals and families in their city. The foundation allocates resources to grantees dedicated to Catholic education, human services, arts and culture and civic renewal. As the foundation emerged from the family's faith inspirations and firm belief in the value

of high-quality education, it is unsurprising that giving to Catholic education represents a significant portion of its grantmaking.

Of more than \$500 million given since its founding in 1955, the Connelly Foundation has committed around \$134 million to Catholic education. In 2024, the foundation committed \$7,046,267.50 to that issue area, accounting for around 46% of its total funding for the year.

ILLUSTRATIVE FAITH-BASED INVESTMENTS

Connelly Foundation's commitment to investing in the Catholic education of students in the Philadelphia region is evident in its list of key grantees. The foundation supports schools broadly through scholarship programs and specific initiatives.

For scholarships, the foundation partners directly with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to provide funding for the Neumann Scholars Program and Josephine C. Connelly Achievement Awards.

Named after 19th century bishop, educator and founder of the Catholic school system in Philadelphia, Saint John Neumann, the first of these programs awards four-year scholarships to high-achieving eighth graders in the region to attend an Archdiocesan high school. Since its creation in 1995, this program has awarded \$22 million in scholarships to 1,232 scholars.

The Josephine C. Connelly Achievement Awards also support students in the parish elementary schools in their choice of a Catholic high school, providing 50% tuition assistance for four years. Also founded in 1995, this program has awarded \$28 million to 4,115 scholars.

Connelly Foundation also supports a variety of [initiatives](#) supporting Catholic education

in the Philadelphia region. Some are in direct partnership with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, such as the Math Matters program, which supports advanced math education for fifth- and eighth-grade students in various Catholic schools across the Philadelphia region.

Others are funded by partnerships with organizations supporting Catholic Philadelphia schools. This includes the School Leadership Development program, which provides opportunities for teachers to develop leadership capacity at programs offered by the Alliance for Catholic Education at the University of Notre Dame and the Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Connelly Foundation exemplifies the value that can be created by funders who remain committed to their founding intent, philosophy and faith inspiration. The foundation has significantly impacted the

lives of those around it and has ensured future generations of its family can continue doing the same by faithfully supporting causes that reflect its vision for flourishing communities.



CONCLUSION

Faith has played an integral role in the development of American philanthropy. For generations, faith has served as one of the principal motivations for this nation's service and generosity, shaping the organizations that care for communities and the donors who invest in them. Values-aligned giving will always be a pivotal form of philanthropy as it allows donors to connect to organizations and issues they believe in and are passionate about.

Faith-inspired donors can be encouraged by the numerous values-aligned organizations in our country rooted in long-term vision,

community investment and a commitment to human flourishing. As today's philanthropists seek to steward their resources faithfully and effectively, the examples in this brief demonstrate the value of generosity to faith-based organizations and the communities they serve.

The Rees-Jones Foundation and Connelly Foundation demonstrate the integral role faith can play inspiring support for a variety of organizations that work to develop physically and spiritually thriving communities in our country and abroad.

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