

Advancing The Diffusion Of Innovation Through Ministry Associations

This report focuses on associations of member ministries that provide direct services to people in need, primarily in the US, from a Christian perspective. This report provides practical insights for association leaders about how to move to the cutting edge. It is not a comprehensive playbook but provides general scoping and insights arranged across a variety of essential association functions. The primary sources were a series of interviews with ministry association leaders and the author's own experience in co-creating the True Charity Network.¹ Appendix A details the ministry associations interviewed or otherwise considered throughout this report.

Defining ministry associations

A ministry association is a gathering of like-minded leaders who have autonomy in how they run their organizations, but enough commonality that they choose to join a community of practice. Ministry associations vary in the level of independence members have in operating their programs (franchise versus full independence). They vary in the level of direct control that members have over the coalition. They also vary in the degree to which the association is oriented towards organizational members versus individual members.

Regardless of structure, all associations are fundamentally voluntary and fairly loosely knit together. Member ministries can come and go at will, and generally pay a fee for membership. Consequently, they must perceive a substantial amount of value in their active participation.

¹ A total of nine formal interviews were conducted for this report. Only the first insight specifically drawn from each interviewee is cited. All subsequent references in the text to those interviewees or their associations derived from those interviews unless another source is referenced. All references to True Charity's practice are based on the author's personal knowledge as VP of Programs for True Charity.

A coalition has to address a comprehensive set of issues in order for it to make sense for a member to engage indefinitely. If you form a coalition around a narrow issue like how to fundraise or build community partnerships, member organizations will leave after they feel like they have solved that problem. Issue-specific coalitions only work with individual members whose job is entirely focused on that issue.

As business-to-business service providers for non-profits, associations typically have small budgets. However, judged against the nonprofit standard for size and growth, coalitions studied for this report are doing well. Some are holding steady; others are growing rapidly. Additionally, once a coalition is established, it doesn't seem to be common for another association to replace it. There are very few coalitions competing head-to-head for the same members. The main exception here is in the pro-life space, which is much more heavily networked than the typical ministry ecosystem (Charlotte Lozier Institute et al., 2025). There are no recent instances of associations being overtaken and fully replaced.

Though they demonstrate numerical stability or growth, budget and headcount alone can't determine whether they are succeeding. Associations are capable of theological or strategic drift, which can pull many of their members astray. Furthermore, if the *telos* of an association is to drive the most effective practices, it can fail to do so just as any ministry can fail in its mission.

What are associations for?

At their core, ministry associations are innovation diffusing machines. Almost all of their value proposition is in some way connected to the creation or dissemination of new ideas. The benefits they offer can be categorized as providing either **Content, Connection, or Clout**.

Content:

- **Repository of Industry Knowledge:** Most of the knowledge required to run a ministry is highly specialized and is not freely available on the internet. Associations compile knowledge about both highly visible **pain points** such as donor management techniques and **blind spots** such as the need to take active measures to protect religious liberty.
- **Benchmarking:** Associations have the ability to aggregate data so that members can identify where their results are excellent and where they lag behind.
- **Innovation Development:** The knowledge repositories and peer communities create an environment where new ideas can form. They can also drive massive model shifts, such as the shift from Pregnancy Resource Centers as providers of basic counseling to the new norm of limited medical clinics (National Institute of Family and Life Advocates, n.d.).
- **Values Transmission:** Most ministries have only a handful of staff and run a high risk of departing from their initial vision with too much staff turnover. Active participation in an association continues to norm their staff against a more stable community.

Connection:

- **Encouragement:** Specialized ministry work is geographically distributed, making it difficult to form support networks of people who genuinely understand the work. Having a peer community of practice can be very important psychologically and the resultant low staff churn is important to sustained growth and innovation.
- **Putting Members on the Map:** Several associations have directories that help their members find clients or potentially donors.

- **Ecosystem Development:** Associations can be the gateways to a wide variety of external resources, from thought leaders to vendors to aligned books and films.

Clout:

- **Shaping National Conversations:** An association can interact with national media, policymakers, and adjacent movements to promote the perspective of their members. This allows the diffusion of ideas beyond the existing boundaries of the movement.
- **Economic Leverage:** Vendor partners often give discounts to nonprofit associations because the aggregation of those members saves their marketing costs, and they can pass the savings along. These vendors are often drivers of innovation themselves.
- **Brand Credibility:** Certifications and association memberships can boost credibility.

What should associations do?

While some associations deliberately diffuse innovations outward from the network in order to grow the movement, the core of all associations is the ability to diffuse information internally across their network. Thus, all ministry associations must accomplish four things:

1. Identify what constitutes “better” practice
2. Grow the association
3. Communicate those better practices to their association members
4. Generate sufficient revenue

The remainder of this report integrates best practices from the networks studied to generate a series of actionable insights for each domain. The insights are not a comprehensive description of everything that needs to be done well, but are focused on areas in which practice was not universal, and it seemed that some organizations had a stronger approach.

1. Identify what constitutes “better” practice

1A: Protect the doctrinal foundation

At the core of all the associations is a set of foundational beliefs, largely shared with all the other ministry associations but distinct from the culture as a whole. Careful stewardship of this doctrinal foundation includes board management, a strong statement of faith, good governing documents, and proactive leadership succession plans.

One concurrent challenge is dealing with denominational polarization. Coalitions have to set boundaries that are broad enough to pull together a meaningful coalition but coherent enough that they don't set up internecine warfare in their tent. On this basis, the theological alignment level ranges from an agreement to a fairly specific statement of faith, such as Adult and Teen Challenge's statement rooted in the doctrine of the Assemblies of God (*Adult & Teen Challenge, USA*, 2026) to True Charity's requirement that members respect a typical evangelical statement of faith but not necessarily agree.

It's important that associations not only protect the doctrinal core of their institution but also the doctrinal core of their members. *Associations are the de facto shepherds of their movements*. Secularization is a major risk to the long-term impact of any Christian ministry (Greer et al., 2014). If associations choose not to address this risk explicitly, they are contributing to it. Since associations are looked to as comprehensive sources of best practice, silence on maintenance of the doctrinal core loudly communicates that putting safeguards around the doctrinal core must not be that important.

The risks of drift from a doctrinal core are not merely theoretical. The Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) was founded only in 1989, and its founder, John

Perkins, maintained an orthodox sexual ethic and pro-life views throughout his entire life (Perkins, 2018). Contra Perkins' consistency, CCDA has made a notable pivot on both issues, the clearest example of which is their formal partnership with the strongly theologically progressive Sojourners Magazine (*CCDA National Conference*, 2024).²

1B: Conduct long-range planning for the movement

One of the key value propositions for associations is that they stay in the “crow’s nest” watching for important trends on the horizon. Thus, their analysis can provide inputs for association members in their longer-term strategic planning. For instance, trends in donations mean that American giving is less broad-based. Though there are still plenty of increasing donations, they tend to be coming from major donors (Convergent Nonprofit Solutions, 2026). Thus, as a tactical matter, organizations need to be well versed in major donor engagement. Similarly, rising secularization means that non-profits need to become skilled at explaining their work in both Christian and secular terms. Even if they are not seeking active support from secular funders or partners, this skill helps them dissuade active opposition.

In order to consistently provide this kind of analysis, associations should include strategic planning for the movement into their annual rhythms. This means, rather than just looking at a simple SWOT analysis, they should incorporate a deeper dive on external issues such as a DEEPLIST analysis (Finlay, 2000). This framework explores shifts in Demographics, Economics, Environment, Politics, Law, Information, Society, and Technology.

² This incongruence cannot be a mere oversight from CCDA's leadership. A December 9th, 2025 email from CCDA to their public audience recommended subscribing to Sojourners Magazine, and one of the articles they highlighted to recommend the subscription was a pro-LGBTQ article about a “Gay Denomination” (Rosenthal, 2025) written by an author who self-identifies as a “transfeminine non-binary person” (Rosenthal, 2018). This email was received from CCDA by the author and is available upon request.

This type of analysis allows associations to be the first to spot looming challenges and opportunities that could affect their members, such as the prospect of decreased government funding, an aging population, or the acceleration of AI. Once identified, associations should also be providing some initial guidance on how to plan for these big shifts. One way would be to publish a macro trends report and let that report also drive some of the content creation priorities.

There may be other thought leaders who are already providing useful insights on how to navigate those trends which you can share with your association. For instance, City Vision University has provided a lot of this analysis for the Rescue Mission movement (A. Sears, personal communication, June 24, 2026).

1C: Proclaim a clear theological vision

The theological vision represents the core ideas driving a ministry (Keller, 2012). Grounded in a doctrinal foundation, these ideas explain the “why” behind the movement. While some theological visions may be relatively unexpressed, the majority of associations express many, if not all, of their beliefs in some sort of statement of principles.

Most associations are the dominant voice in their space, however they define it. Additionally, many of the association members are highly susceptible to incorporating the frameworks that they learn from their associations. For instance, City Leader Collective measured that 46% of their members used a “Four Greats” theological framing they built within three years of its creation (R. Kelly, personal communication, July 1, 2026). This means associations *have a tremendous responsibility to put robust thought into the building of any principles or frameworks*. Ideas, whether well formed or poorly thought through will be accepted as expert and will find their way into the vocabulary of association members.

The Accord Network took a particularly robust approach in the development of their Integral Mission Principles. They incorporated 70 collaborators from around the world over a three-year period to distill eight principles and their definitions (Accord Network, n.d.-a).

Once established, guarding this theological vision requires using it as a filter to screen out asserted best practices that are not aligned with the organization's values and goals. Of course, a theological vision cannot be purely stagnant. While foundational doctrine is timeless truth, a theological vision is truth *for* a time. It should be carefully refreshed in dialogue with association insiders and outsiders every three to five years.

1D: Build a five stream innovation inlet

Affiliation leaders are pulling their innovations from five useful sources:

Network members: The lion's share of innovations come from network members, which can be gathered through one-to-one interaction, interviews, surveys, conversations at events, and site visits from association leadership to members.

Aligned equipping organizations: One of the fastest ways associations can create and disseminate high-quality innovations is by partnering with specialists in that area of innovation. This can include consultants (E.g., Radiant Global Insights and Life on Belay), academic partners (E.g., Wheaton College or Bakke University), theological thought leaders (E.g., the Chalmers Center and Disciple of the Nations Alliance) and policy/philosophy think tanks (E.g., the Better Cities Project or the Acton Institute).

Scholarly research: The Correctional Ministry and Chaplains Association pulls about 70% of its insights from the robust field of corrections science and distills evidence-based “desistance factors” along with other practices (K. Swanson, personal communication, June 24, 2026).

Deliberate internal research: Associations can intentionally poll their network or even partner with researchers. For instance, Adult and Teen Challenge recently partnered with Barna for a national addiction study (God-Sized Vision, 2019).

Cross-Cultural Insights: The Accord Network meets annually with global relief and development associations to learn best practices from other contexts (M. Cerna, personal communication, July 16, 2026). Cross-cultural can also extend to fields outside of the ministry field, such as attending a technology or business conference. Valerie Harkins of the Maternity Housing Coalition noted that she's always asking the question, "Are we in an echo chamber?" She brings in outside specialists like doctors and lawyers to engage with her members to ensure they don't arrive at "group think" practices (V. Harkins, personal communication, July 7, 2026).

It's important for associations to cordon off dedicated resources for innovation discovery. By dedicating substantial organizational time to the discovery of innovation, it creates internal pressure for the things learned to be distributed to the network. While the ratio of innovation from each stream is going to depend on the topic, it is very worthwhile to build a systematic inlet to actively monitor all five streams. A diverse portfolio of innovation inlets will result in better finds than reliance on serendipity.

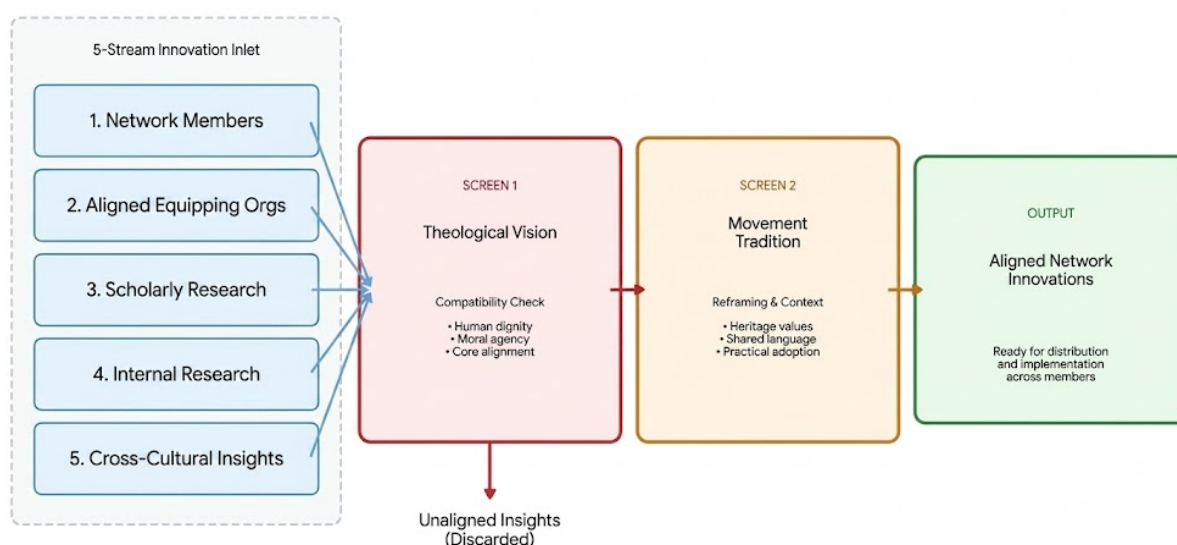
Once innovations are discovered, they need to be checked against the theological vision for compatibility, and filtered through the tradition of the movement (Figure 1). This reframing through a lens of tradition helps ensure alignment of the practice with the core values and maximizes the chance it will be well received. For instance, best practices in trauma-informed care from secular research might need to be checked against a theological vision that recognizes

moral agency. This would screen out approaches to trauma-informed care which assume that a person is almost entirely a traumatized victim reacting to stimuli with no ability to make choices.

A lens of tradition can provide language to explain why trauma-informed care is important. For instance, “the rescue mission movement has always gone out into the highways and byways and met people where they are. Trauma-informed care allows us to continue to meet people where they are psychologically as well as where they are physically.”

Figure 1

Five-Stream Innovation Inlet & Filtration Pipeline



Note. Diagram created with Google Gemini.

1E: Build a robust skeleton for your best practices

Once identified, innovations need to not only be filtered through the theological vision but also mapped within the scope of topics the organization wants to cover. The innovations covered need to be within intentional limits, but fairly broad ones. Oversimplification is an error here, because if narrow boundaries are enforced, the scope of the association won't meet enough felt needs to

keep members long term. If the boundaries aren't drawn at all, then the topics the association covers will sprawl unsystematically, be difficult to navigate, and not go very deep.

A great example of a comprehensive framework is City Leader Collective's Tree Model. They use a robust metaphor of a tree and break down components of the picture, including the soil, the roots, trunk, branches, the fruit, etc., to build a 12-part model robust enough for a 12-week cohort study. Once a city leader in their network has gone through this cohort, he or she has a good grasp on all of the elements of a healthy city movement. Another comparable example is the Accord Network's eleven principles of practice (Accord Network, n.d.-b).

1F: Build an “overton window” for robust debate

In the words of Valerie Harkins of the Maternity Housing Coalition, “there is no such thing as best practices, only better practices.” Because better practices are constantly evolving, it can be difficult to determine which ones represent the state of the art. Other than assuring alignment with doctrine or theological vision, the association leadership *may be the least equipped to determine if something is a good idea*, since they are the farthest removed from implementation.

Yet they can still provide great value to their association by acting as a platform for debate. This is particularly important to maintain the engagement of mature members who have the capacity to be thought leaders in their own right. The Accord Network provided the clearest example of this as they intentionally place perspectives in head-to-head opposition several times during the annual conference. These informal debates are conducted in the spirit of everyone learning from the discussion rather than a winner-take-all framing. They also have a formal journal so that debates can take place in writing as well.

2. Grow the association

2A: Treat referrals as the primary growth channel

No associations interviewed noted any substantial returns from sponsorship, paid ads, or social media. A combination of word of mouth and passive content marketing seems to be where most members originate. Public-facing content or events give members something to share with non-members to easily communicate the value. This can include a monthly call open to the public (City Leader Collective), webinars and articles (True Charity), and a high-value newsletter (Maternity Housing Coalition & the Accord Network).

Additionally, members can be trained to recruit others to the network such as through the True Charity Ambassador Program.³ Over a two-year window, 28% of True Charity's members came from general member referrals, 10% came from trained ambassadors, and another 10% came from passive content marketing/ web presence.⁴ The Accord Network also identified word of mouth and targeted introductions as the driver of its 50% growth over the past few years.

2B: Partnership with adjacent audiences is a standout strategy for active growth

The most active marketing strategies that do show some promise are partnerships with adjacent audiences. These adjacent audiences are members of related associations, attendees at relevant conferences, or clients of other equipping organizations like curriculum providers. If an association recommends a third-party financial literacy course, some of the users of that third-party financial literacy course might be a good fit for the association.

³ True Charity Ambassadors are members who participate in an eight-session cohort and periodic ongoing meetings to help them have a deeper understanding of True Charity resources and how to communicate them to others.

⁴ All True Charity statistics come from the authors' access to True Charity's KPIs in the two-year window beginning July 2024.

True Charity's mutual promotion resource partnership program has recruited 16% of new members in the past two years and contributed to further speaking and exhibiting opportunities which have netted another 17%.

All told, the referral strategies in insight 2A, account for 48% of member growth and the partnership-based marketing provided another 33%. True Charity was a stand out for growth, recruiting 183 new members over the past two years.

2C Members come for content, stay for connection

In order for recruitment to grow the association, retention has to remain healthy. While low-end retention was around 70%, three associations⁵ reported retention higher than 90%. Note that high retention must be coupled with a suitable growth rate in order to be a sign of ideal management. Unhealthy sources of retention include having high barriers to entry, which ensures only very committed members are in the network, and having near zero recruitment, which means over time the most committed members would stabilize, leaving retention high.

For the three associations with the highest retention rate, they all had exceptional levels of member-to-member or member-to-association connection. The Accord Network facilitates 12 to 15 monthly calls for practitioner sub-communities like HR professionals. The Maternity Housing Coalition provides roughly 500 consultation sessions for only 200 members in a given year. Brandon Thomas, former staff member and current association member of Citygate Network, noted that his tie to the network is as much familial as anything (B. Thomas, personal communication, July 2, 2026). As he personally built much of the content his rescue mission is

⁵ Maternity Housing Coalition, Adult and Teen Challenge, and the Accord Network

now paying to access, his content needs from Citygate network are minimal, but his relationships are the driving factor to maintain membership into the future.

Yet, this high level of relational connection takes strong programming and years to build and is not automatically associated with increased recruitment. Thus, it seems that more association members see a felt need for content, which causes them to join the network, but connection causes them to remain in the network even after their content needs are met.

3. Communicate Practices to Association Members

3A: Stay tuned in to problems members care about

Since desired content is always going to outpace content production, associations must know which pain points are affecting their members the most. Without a deliberate process, there is a high risk of availability bias, meaning that a single conversation between a member and a key leader results in the prioritization of some content which is irrelevant to 85% of the network.

For networks with a high level of facilitated connection, recording those engagements can be helpful for accurately sampling pain points. The Accord Network is able to use the dozen-plus monthly calls to gauge member needs, and the Maternity Housing Coalition aggregates notes from their consultations and uses simple AI tools to identify needs.

Another robust system for member engagement is a member advisory committee. The member advisory committee of the Correctional Ministry and Chaplains Association meets for an in-person annual retreat, which allows them to provide input on strategic planning and a much deeper level of direction than if they were merely surveyed.

Additionally, while the theological vision rarely represents a felt pain point of members, it should be baked into practical content. Members are more likely to engage with a practical

how-to guide on case management than a course on the significance of the Imago Dei. Yet the significance of the Imago Dei can be explicitly covered in the practical case management course. The author refers to this as the “Iodine Principle” in analogy to how the micronutrient iodine was intentionally added to a product which Americans already desired: salt (Markel, 2014).

3B: Focus on channels that combine content with connection and scale

Associations have a wide range of distribution channels at their disposal to communicate ideas. All told, there were 21 distinct ways of disseminating information, ranging from 1-to-1 member introductions to CEO retreats (Appendix B). When considering how to select and optimize channels, associations should seek to maximize three factors:

$$\textit{Relevance} \times \textit{Connection} \times \textit{Exposure}.$$

The **relevance** component ensures content addresses a felt need to a sufficiently dialed in audience. The **connection** multiplier refers to how interactive the content is with other members. For instance, all else equal, attendees of a four-session cohort with small group breakouts would be expected to inculcate the concepts to a greater degree than attendees of a non-interactive four-webinar series. While you can theoretically achieve contemplation and engagement without connection, most adult learners are simply not going to answer application questions if they are not in an actual discussion. The **exposure** factor gauges how many people receive the content and at what dosage. This is important because oftentimes activities that generate stronger connections also draw fewer people. It's easy to applaud the impact of an in-person event on attendees, but lose track of the fact that 80% of individual members did not attend.

While some channels are inherently more connection-oriented than others (e.g., web meetings are more connective than blog posts), all channels can be made more

connection-centric. For instance, a blog with frequent guest publication from members offers a higher connection factor than articles solely written by association leaders.

Additionally, to ensure that a connection channel maximizes relevance, affinity groups (with virtual or live events) offer a great opportunity to connect members to others similar to them. Generally, type or size of ministry, as well as a person's role within a ministry, are more relevant than geography (Sears, 2026).

3C: Combine shallow content to build awareness with deep implementation support for a few

There's a substantial difference between a surface-level explanation and exposure to a new idea, and content that goes deep enough that someone can fully implement. Both types of content are necessary. The first serves primarily as an internal marketing play to help members become aware of better practices and blind spots. However, the deeper content is critical to ensuring that once they are convinced of the importance of the idea, they have an avenue to implement it well.

This can take the form of an individual or organizational certification, an intensive virtual cohort, or a focused live event. Examples of live events include Accord's AI Summit (Accord Network, 2026) and Citygate's Impact Labs (Citygate Network, n.d.-a), which combines training with site visits to exemplary peers.

Diffusion of innovation theory suggests that you don't need all of your members to implement an idea in order to start a snowball that rolls up the entire association (Rogers, 2003). Equipping even 10 to 20% of your members with a deep knowledge can help everyone in the system understand things more deeply.

Additionally, some members will be better early adopters than others. Medium-sized members, large enough to have escaped from some of the tyranny of the urgent but small enough

that they are structurally willing and able to try new things, tend to lead the way here.⁶ Once these members have thoroughly adopted the practices, they can be highlighted to other members and act as peer exemplars to speed up the spread of the innovation across the network.

3D: Optimize Rogers' factors to increase innovation take-up and durability

Diffusion of innovation theory supports that five factors increase the uptake of all innovations (Rogers, 2003). Associations can use these to reframe best practices for increased adoption.

Relative Advantage: People are more likely to implement ideas and technologies that are substantially superior to their current ones. Even if you prove that a new practice is better than an old one, take the time to quantify and illustrate how much better. If you have five minutes of an event to encourage your members to make better use of AI, you should demonstrate a transformative use case (even if it's too difficult for most members to implement) rather than an easy-to-implement mild improvement (C. Chan, personal communication, July 9, 2026).

Compatibility: Show that your recommendation is compatible with previous practices and core beliefs. This may involve supporting a practice with scripture, such as how Old Testament gleaning models show the wisdom of asking clients to participate in their own solutions.

Associations should rarely position any recommendation as a radical break with the past, but rather as a continuation of gradual learning, grounded in the ethos and tradition of the movement.

Complexity: While the overall framework for what assistance you provide may be complex (per insight 1E), any given recommendation should be as simple as possible. Don't provide more theoretical explanation than necessary, and give as much practical detail as is helpful. If you

⁶ Michael Cerna identified that organizations under \$25 million in annual revenue were more innovative. However, while that may constitute a smaller Accord Network member, that would be a larger organization in the True Charity Network. Thus, while in relative terms True Charity's larger members are more innovative and Accord's smaller members are more innovative, in absolute terms these organizations fall in the same size range of \$3 mil to \$25 mil.

want members to start measuring outcomes, provide a sample survey and a pre-built Google form rather than a book on outcomes theory.

Trialability: Make recommendations easy to try before you buy. Give people sample first steps which will help them observe whether the recommendation works and build early momentum. If you want them to adopt trauma-informed practices, give them one or two to try.

Observability: The easier it is to see someone else using innovation, the more likely it is that others will adopt it. This is one of the superpowers of associations. Lone wolf organizations may have no idea what practices are being implemented by their peers. Associations can feature members who adopt recommended practices in everything from newsletters to annual awards.

Reinvention: Beyond the five previous factors which determine how quickly innovation will be adopted, reinvention predicts how durable the change will be. The more heavily adapted the innovation is to the local context, the more likely it is to stick (Rogers, 2003). This is why True Charity digital resources offer substantial editable documents. This is also one of the reasons that curriculum vendors who demand high levels of fidelity to their model often find their franchisees leaving and reworking the curriculum in their own way.⁷

3E: Don't be a hammer salesman, build a hardware store

The innovations your network fosters through direct content creation and targeted connections will necessarily be limited by your resources. This can put you in the position of the notorious hammer salesman, to whom everything looks like a nail. Rather than trying to imagine that your content solves more problems than it does, the solution is to have a robust set of external

⁷ The author has observed this several times in regards to implementers of Jobs for Life and Circles USA.

partners. This can be a formal business membership like Citygate's or a less formal arrangement of featuring external resources, like City Leader Collective does on its monthly calls.

Since many of these resource providers also have marketing budgets and great difficulty finding relevant customers, this is one program that tends to pay for itself and grow the network (see insight 2B). Keep in mind that, as the “hardware store proprietor,” associations are still responsible for the quality of tools they recommend. Brandon Thomas, formerly of Citygate, points out it is important to partner based on the relevance of resources for members and not merely to promote the highest bidder.

3F: Build movement culture, not just content

The best associations provide not just a set of specific best practices, but an organic environment in which innovation and culture can flourish. In all cases, the movement, which consists of association members as well as adjacent stakeholders like vendors, can create far more content than the association can create centrally.

Rather than simply trying to unload a fixed set of best practices, associations should also create vibrant hubs for the creation of new cultural artifacts, such as books written by members, franchisable programs, or films that illustrate the beliefs and impact of the movement (Sears, 2026). These artifacts should be screened against the theological vision, but not held to the same production standard as the association's own work. Homegrown tomatoes are especially delicious to the network, even if they have few spots on them.

This culture building element role may also have an “air traffic control” element to it. By seeing the broader movement landscape, associations can identify open lanes and nudge partners

to fill them. They can also help vendors stay in “blue ocean” spaces, providing distinct value and not competing head to head with commoditized products (Kim & Mauborgne, 2015).

Another way a movement can facilitate a healthy ecosystem is by providing a job board. An active job board creates useful cross-pollination within the network and helps keep talent in the movement as it provides more pathways for upward mobility into senior roles. This offering could generate some tension if members perceive that others are “poaching their staff.” To the contrary, Michael Cerna of the Accord Network, affirmed that this was not a problem. People moving around from one organization to another is quite common within their network, which is a credit to the “rooting for the rivals” ecosystem they have helped fertilize.

4. Sustain the Association

4A: Growth-prospect members respond to lower prices

While Citygate and the Accord Network do charge substantially for high-budget members, most of these high-budget members have grown up with the associations over the past 50+ years (or helped co-create it). They were not recruited at high prices. Additionally, the length of service of these associations makes the relational ties so deep that the willingness to pay is much higher. In Accord's case, the cost of delivering services to a large member is also much higher, since their model is strongly dependent on facilitated micro-communities.

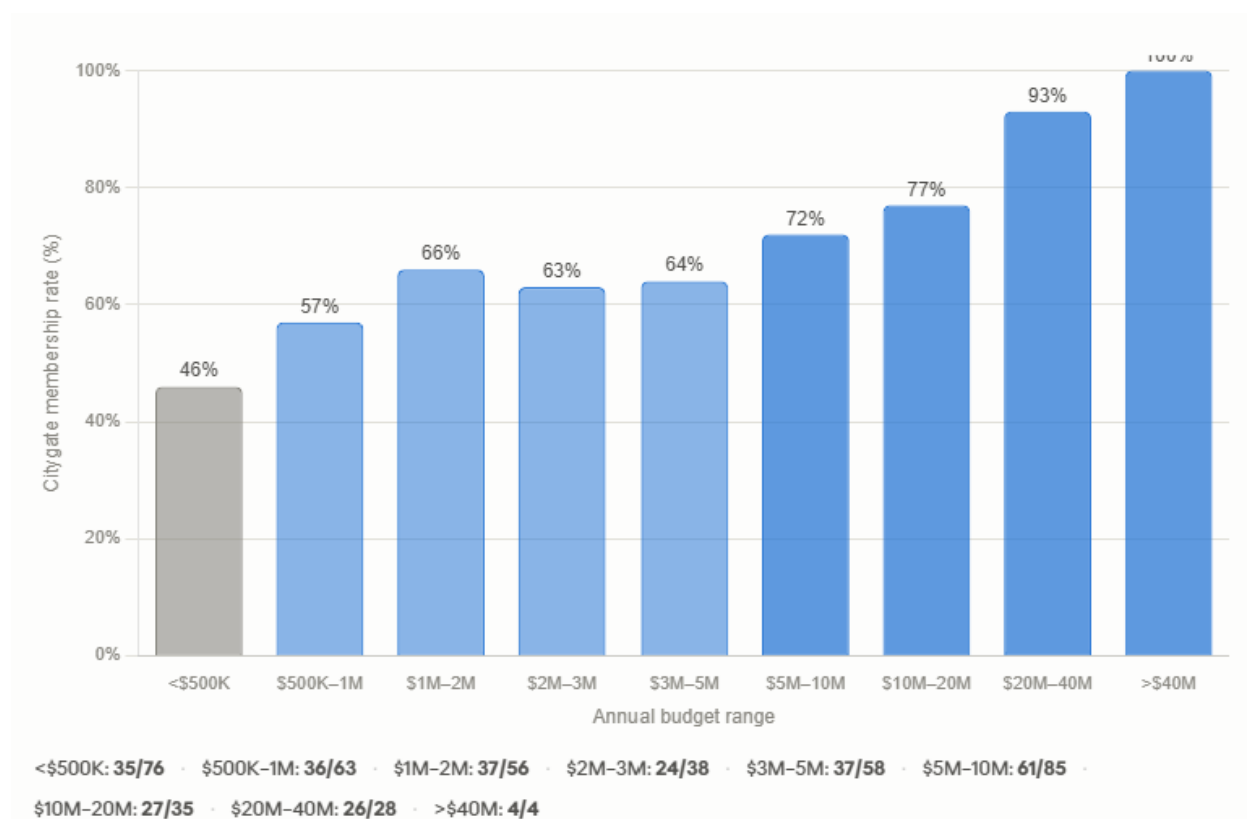
The ministries who represent the best growth prospects are the ones who haven't already been in an association for 25 years. These are small to mid-sized, and evidence suggests that they are very sensitive to price. For instance, the author's analysis⁸ of a database of all known rescue missions found that lower budget missions were substantially less likely to be Citygate members

⁸ The data set is maintained by City Vision University and available on request.

(Figure 2). Despite being the longest running ministry association in America, while Citygate has 9 in 10 missions with greater than \$20 million budgets, it has only 4 in 10 ministries with less than \$500,000 budgets. Citygate's prices for sub-\$1 million missions, which range from \$500 to \$2,500 (Citygate Network, n.d.-b), are clearly outside of the reach of many of them. The Accord Network charges roughly half the fee of Citygate for low budget members and has added substantially more, growing by around 45 members in the past two years.

Figure 2

Participation in Citygate Network From Rescue Missions Based on Their Budget



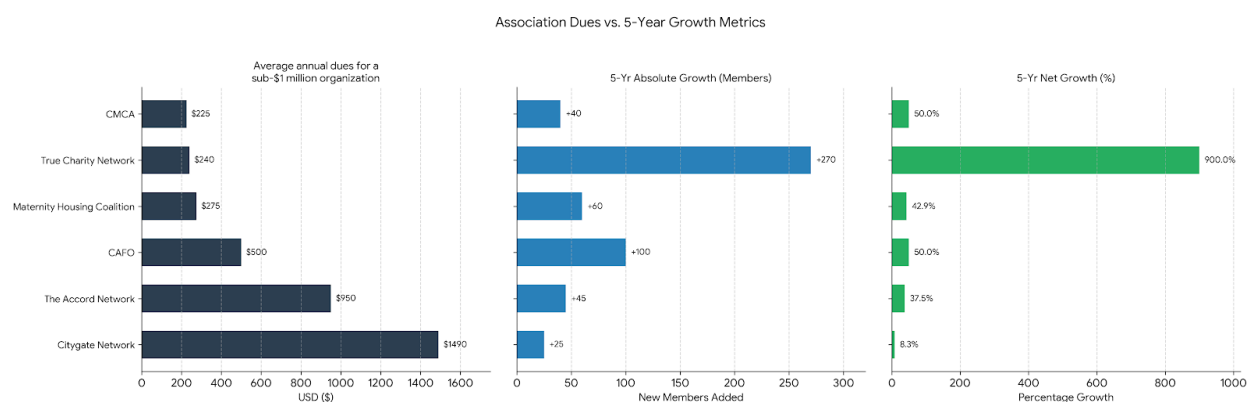
Note. Created with Claude based on a data set of 443 rescue missions across the US.

While Accord and Citygate may have the greatest ability to charge due to the size of their members and the depth of their connections, associations that have started in the past couple of decades and are growing more rapidly are charging far less. The Maternity Housing Coalition has secured about half of maternity homes in America in 13 years at a price point of \$300, with first year free for a new center. True Charity added 183 members in the past two years at a price point under \$300. The Correctional Ministry and Chaplains Association has also secured all of its membership since 2011 in this price range. And the newest association on the block, City Leaders Collective, doesn't have any membership dues but simply charges a one-time fee for a one year cohort on a sliding scale, with most organizations paying in the \$1,200 to \$3,000 range.

Figure 3 shows the relationship between pricing for sub-million-dollar organizations and association growth in absolute and percent terms. While associations are not commodities and numerous other factors affect growth, lower pricing is certainly one of them.

Figure 3

Representative Sample of Association Dues Versus Five-year Growth Metrics

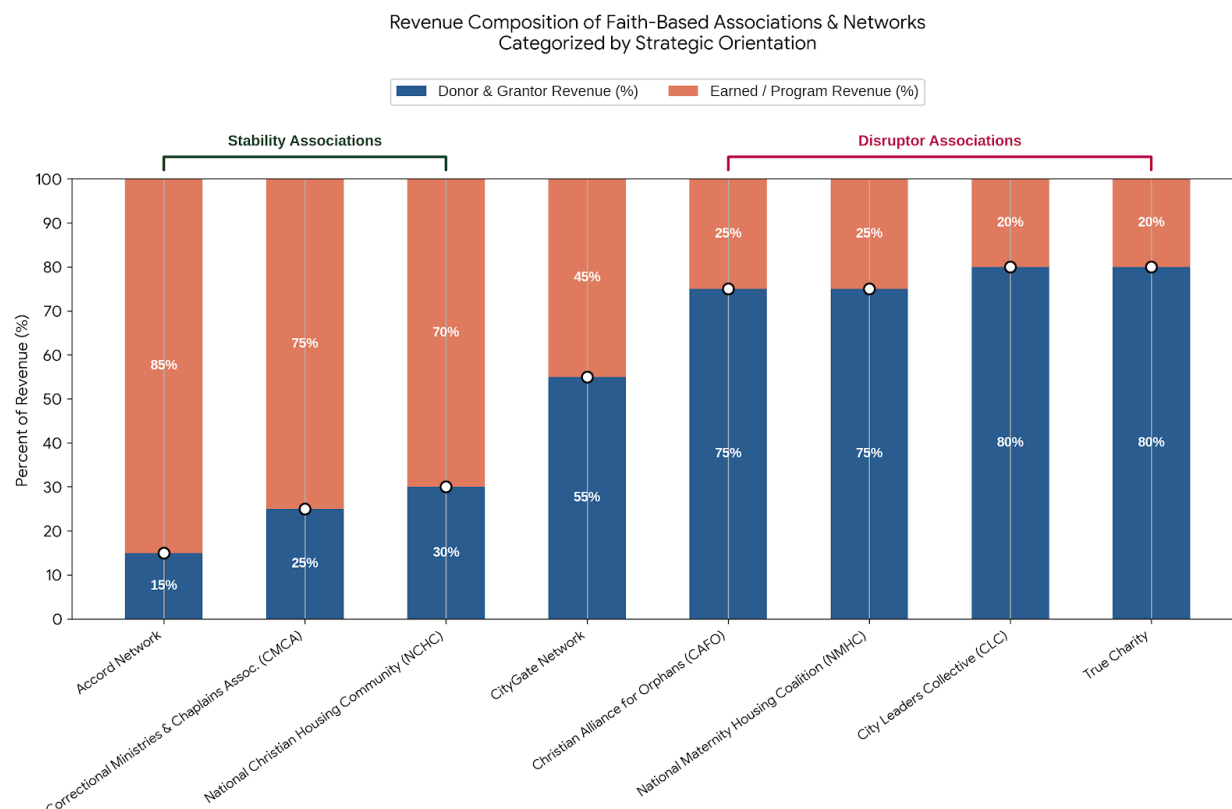


Note. Created with Google Gemini with data from organizational websites and interviews.

4B: Disruption is a key driver of major donor support

Of the associations interviewed, some positioned themselves as incremental improvers and boosters. Others position themselves as disrupters driving major change. For instance, City Leader Collective focuses on the underappreciated theology of the city church, their conviction that the most common reference to the church in the New Testament is the multi-congregation collective of all believers in the city. True Charity asserts that perpetual crisis relief, the normative model for domestic poverty alleviation, is counterproductive and needs to be upended. While neither of these visions were developed for the purpose of appealing to funders, they are inherently more appealing than incremental innovation.

It may be that disrupter associations have an easier time raising money, or it may be that they focus more effort on raising money. Whichever one of these things is true, they have quite a bit more success rallying external support than stability-oriented associations. The difference is dramatic. Figure 4 illustrates clearly that disruptor associations tend to be about three-quarters donor-funded, while stability associations tend to be closer to one-quarter donor-funded.

Figure 4*Revenue Composition of a Sample of Associations by Strategic Orientation*

Note. Built with Google Gemini and data collected from interviews and 990s. Citygate was difficult to categorize cleanly, which is also reflected in its revenue breakdown.

4C: Associations can quantify the fruit that grows on other people's trees

In addition to communicating a value proposition to prospective members, associations also have to communicate their value to donors. For True Charity, this looks like measuring the percent of members who have made a practice change which they attribute to True Charity's tools and training (64% after one year of membership). City Leader Collective is in the process of a three-year longitudinal study to determine city movement health and impact. The Maternity

Housing Coalition and Adult and Teen Challenge have both worked with external partners, the Lab for Economic Opportunity and Barna respectively, to assess the effectiveness of their member organizations. Unsurprisingly, the associations that seem most interested in measuring impact are the ones who benefit most from external donor support.

Technology Frontiers

The previous sections of this report covered existing best practices; however, as associations advance, the approaches that got us to where we are won't take us where we need to be.

Artificial intelligence provides a unique opportunity for associations to both supercharge their impact, as well as equip member ministries to do the same. According to AI expert Chris Chan, ministries often lag the tech adoption curve by as much as a decade relative to businesses.

In the case of AI, association leaders have a choice. The eventual diffusion of this technology is nearly inevitable, but expediting the rate of diffusion can be transformative for cash-strapped associations and their members. The following insights will help associations stay in the vanguard of the redemptive use of AI:⁹

5A: Maximal use of AI functionally adds one or more team members

Most associations are already making substantial use of AI for content development and communication, while providing sensible levels of human review to ensure quality and protect the theological vision. The Accord Network leads the way in this, not only maximizing the impact of its small team but also providing an AI Summit to equip members to use the technology better. Their event description merits sharing here:

“The playing field has been leveled. An organization with a \$500,000 budget and one

⁹ Praxis provides a theoretical framework for AI use from a Christian perspective (Crouch et al., 2024).

person willing to learn Claude Code can now build the same custom solutions that were previously available only to organizations with \$50–100 million budgets and dedicated IT departments. The intensive proves this thesis by having every participant do it in two days. (Accord Network, 2026)”

5B: AI may diminish the value of association produced content

If it is true that members come for content and stay for connection (see insight 3C), then AI proposes a substantial threat to this model. In the near future, it will be easy to build a customized case management manual, outcomes measurement survey, and employee handbook using low-cost AI tools. These are the exact kinds of resources that currently provide the felt need to join an association. Of course, the connection and clout components of association value will still remain strong and could even increase in value, so it's important that associations invest heavily in aspects which are more AI-proof.

5C: AI allows information synthesis to keep pace with collection

Retrieval Augmented Generation or (RAG) is technology that augments an AI model with private data before it generates a response (Amazon Web Services, n.d.). By using one or more RAG interfaces, associations can give members access to large amounts of data without having to sort and refine it. For instance, you could have a Gemini Notebook on employee policies in which you upload 20 member employee manuals. Then, members can dialogue with the notebook to build a draft set of sample policies tailored to them, filtered through these specific best practices in your data set.

On a broader scale, business management tools like FINSYNC show how associations can leverage proprietary data and AI user interfaces to rapidly contextualize information for

members (FINSYNC, n.d.). FINSYNC offers a comprehensive solution for small business owners that uses AI to help build business plans as well as research market conditions and make projections. Deft deployment of RAG and other means of combining proprietary data with AI interfaces provide responses that are far more useful than general models can achieve.

5D: AI allows frictionless give-to-get data benchmarking

Associations can create value by collecting member data and building benchmarks. To incentivize reporting, associations often use a give-to-get format where any member that, for instance, fills out a salary survey will receive the full salary report. Currently, this process is laborious and far from automated. Using AI, it's possible to build a give-to-get data system where, provided a minimum number of people have put in information, all subsequent respondents can see answers immediately, anonymized once they enter their own.

5E: AI allows online courses to go from linear to adaptive

For content with greater depth, on demand online courses are a frequent offering of associations. The online courses of the future will be adaptive to the needs and interests of the learner. While this has been possible historically through the complex “choose your own adventure” if/then branches, AI makes it easy. The good news about this technology is that natural competition will drive standard Learning Management Systems (LMS) to incorporate these features. Associations should be able to find an LMS that incorporates adaptive learning or adopt the features as soon as it's available in the LMS that they are currently using.¹⁰

¹⁰ Example of an adaptive LMS: <https://360learning.com/>

5F: AI can introduce association members to each other at scale

Associations create great value by introducing relevant members to each other. This is difficult to do at scale, and even where good connections happen, there may be many missed opportunities. AI can be used to create one-to-one matches based on interest areas, regions, role, seniority level, and other factors. In addition to generating the match, AI can also send introduction emails with descriptions of why the conversation needs to happen and sort out scheduling to reduce friction.¹¹

5G: Robust online events can bring the annual event to far more members

As valuable as an in-person gathering can be, when the association is large, it also tends to draw a relatively small fraction of overall association members. While live streaming is not a new concept, associations have not explored the real limits of this technology. Advantages to online events include the ability to send more team members which allows greater discussion and application than insights returning in the scribbled notes of a single leader.

An interesting disruptor in the pregnancy resource center space is the upstart Centers Together online event (Centers Together, n.d.). Directly competing with established conferences, it offers a team of five access to a robust three-day set of virtual content and interaction for as little as \$150, compared to a \$7,000 cost to send the same team to a typical conference.

¹¹ Example of an AI tool for introducing members to each other: <https://www.connectnetworks.ai/>

Conclusion

Dr. Andrew Sears points out that associations are like churches, in that every ministry should belong to one for its own health. The corollary to this insight, affirmed elsewhere in this report, is that associations have a pastoral role. Thus, their fiduciary responsibility goes beyond the level of a typical consultant dispensing “take-it-or-leave-it” advice.

Brandon Thomas reminds us that associations must always remember that they exist to serve, not to be served. As associations struggle to get members to fill out a survey or register for an event, they must recall that their member ministries are faced with extreme challenges every day—challenges of addiction, trauma, loss, and abuse. It is the privilege of an association to lighten their burdens and to help them see better yield for their work. May God grant us wisdom to shepherd innovation and a heart to serve the servants well.

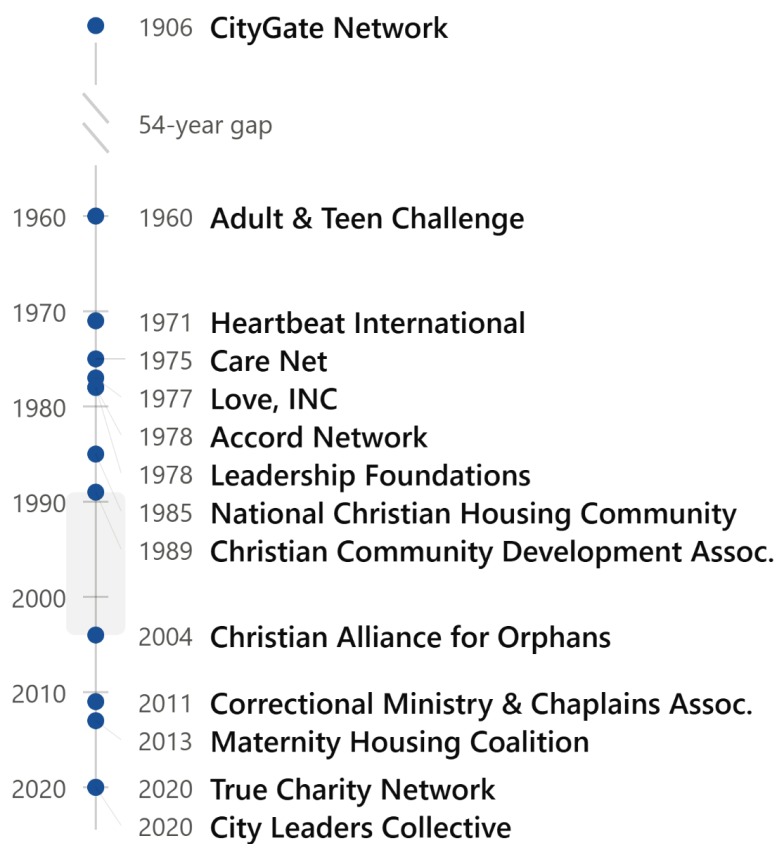
Appendix A: Profile of Ministry Associations Considered in This Report

Organization	Primary Cause/Model	Founded	Affiliate Organizations	Conference Attendees
CityGate Network	Homelessness	1906	325	1,200
Adult & Teen Challenge (franchise model)	Addiction Recovery	1960	215	500 (every 2 years)
Heartbeat International	Pro-Life, Pregnancy Health Clinics	1971	2,400 (US only)	1,800
Care Net	Pro-Life, Pregnancy Health Clinics	1975	1,200	1,800
Love, INC (franchise model)	City-level poverty alleviation	1977	120	250 (every 2 years)
Accord Network	International Relief and Development	1978	165	350
Leadership Foundations (franchise model)	City collaboration/ service	1978	40	250 (every 3 years)
National Christian Housing Community	Maternity Homes	1985	120	150
Christian Community Development Association	Place-based Community Development	1989	1,000	2,000
Christian Alliance for Orphans	Child welfare	2004	300 + 800 church members	3,000
Correctional Ministry and Chaplains Association	Prison and Re-entry Ministry	2011	120	300
Maternity Housing Coalition (within Heartbeat)	Pro-Life, Pregnancy Health Clinics	2013	200	1,600 live 400 virtual
True Charity Network	Effective Poverty Alleviation	2020	300	275
City Leaders Collective	City Movements	2020	103	150

Note. Data sourced from a combination of websites, Google Gemini, formal interviews and the author's prior conversations and event attendance. Association membership and conference attendance are approximate.

Figure 5

Visualization of Timeline Created by Claude.



Appendix B: List of Common Programs Run by Associations

1. Academic journal
2. Articles
3. Awards, shout outs, and other recognition of exceptional work
4. CEO retreats
5. Data gathering and sector benchmarking
6. Formal certification and accreditation programs
7. General national gathering/topical conferences
8. Government policy advocacy and education
9. Group purchasing cooperatives and recommended resource partners
10. Jobs board
11. Live, local events on demand
12. Member portal and digital resource libraries
13. Member site visits
14. One-on-one consultation, operational coaching
15. One-to-one member connections and mentorship programs
16. Online learning academies
17. Podcasts
18. Regional gatherings, districts, and local cohorts
19. Virtual meetings/affinity groups
20. Virtual peer cohorts
21. Webinars

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