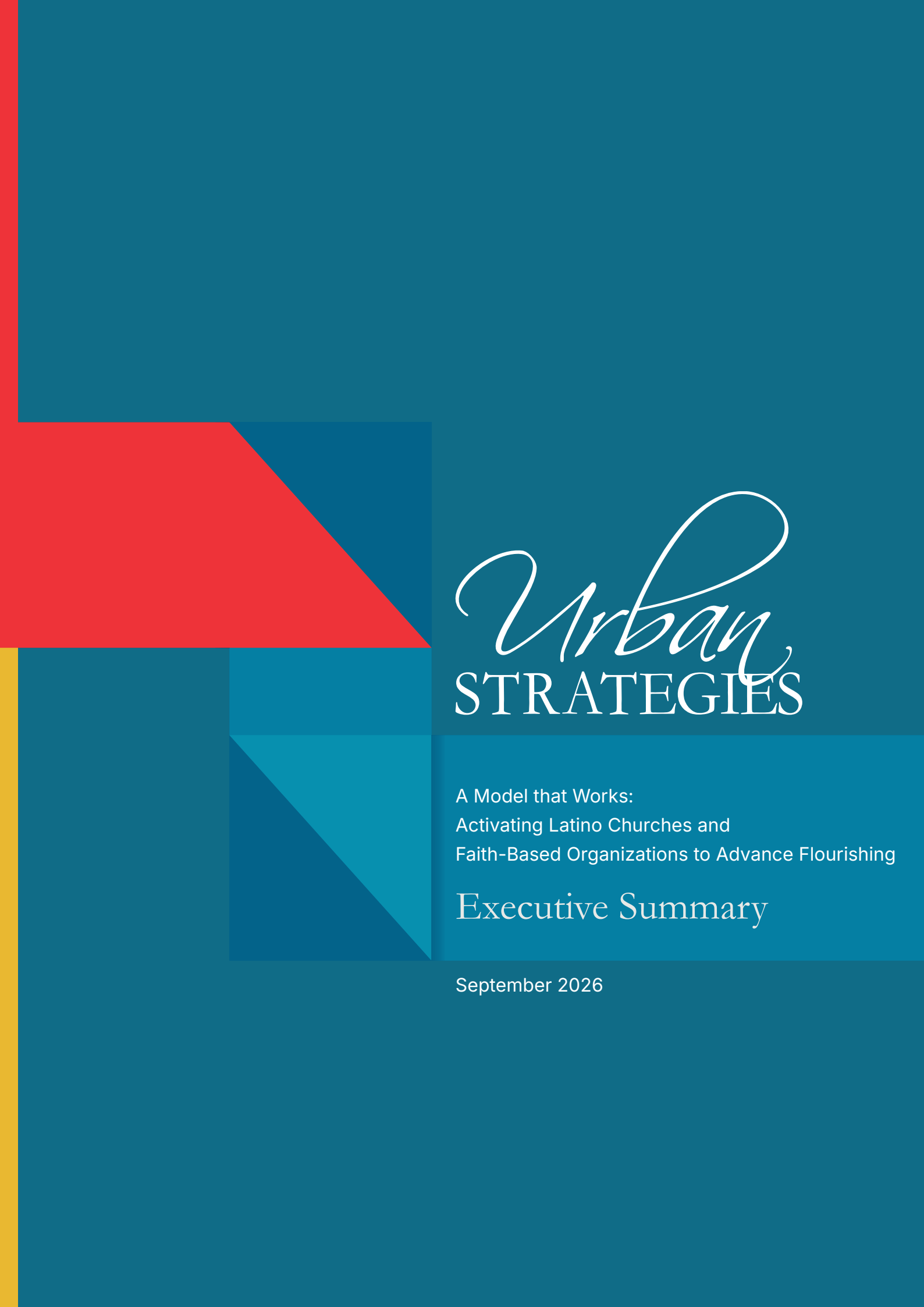




Urban STRATEGIES

A Model that Works:
Activating Latino Churches and
Faith-Based Organizations to Advance Flourishing

Executive Summary

September 2026



❖❖ CONTRIBUTIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- **Tara Henríquez, MSW** (Program Evaluator, Urban Strategies) served as the lead evaluator for the organization-wide evaluation. She was responsible for the study design, project management, and the development and/or selection of survey and interview instruments. She also provided oversight of all data collection activities, including coordination of survey data collection and interviews across the three regions. Lastly, she conducted all qualitative analyses and selected quantitative analyses, synthesized and interpreted the findings, and led the drafting and finalization of the report.
- **Lin Jiang, Ph.D.** (Evaluation Consultant) provided expert review of the evaluation design, survey instrument selection, and data collection strategies. She contributed to the development and validation of one survey instrument, conducted quantitative analyses for three surveys, and provided revisions for the final report, including regarding the synthesis and interpretation of findings. She also provided editorial feedback and policy-relevant insights.
- **Andrés Emiliano Sierra Martínez, Ph.D.** (Statistical Analyst Consultant) conducted quantitative analyses for two surveys and contributed to the interpretation of quantitative findings.





❖❖ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Urban Strategies, a social impact organization with over 20 years of experience partnering with Latino churches and community and faith-based organizations (FBOs), conducted an organization-wide evaluation to assess the effectiveness of its partnership model in advancing community development efforts and improving outcomes for children, youth, and families. Urban Strategies' work is situated in Latino communities across the United States and Central America where access to culturally responsive services, resources, and infrastructure is often limited. In this context, Urban Strategies works through partnerships with Latino churches and FBOs to extend reach and accessibility at the local level. By strengthening the capacity of these trusted local institutions, the partnership model aims to address service gaps in ways that are both effective and sustainable, ultimately contributing to increased flourishing among community members across multiple generations. This study generates evidence of the model's effectiveness, highlighting the unique contributions of Latino faith-based partners. Furthermore, it offers important implications for how practitioners, funders, and policymakers can more strategically allocate resources to support underserved communities. Such investment is particularly important given that Latino organizations receive less than 1% of philanthropic funding,¹ despite Latinos representing a growing share of the U.S. population.²

Urban Strategies delivers programming in a wide range of areas including: early childhood development, community health, housing and case management services for vulnerable children, youth development, abuse prevention, family strengthening, and pastoral well-being. This comprehensive set of programs works together to build the capacity of Latino churches and FBOs and promote the well-being of their communities. The evaluation examined the extent to which this approach contributes to intended medium- and long-term outcomes, with particular attention to its faith-based partnerships and those characteristics associated with effective community development. For partnering churches and organizations, medium-term expected outcomes include the alignment of paradigms to Christian Community Development (CCD) principles,³ increased organizational capacity, and greater motivation to engage in community-focused efforts. Long-term outcomes include expanded and strengthened community development efforts. For children, families, and church leaders participating in programming, medium-term expected outcomes include improvements in well-being across domains (physical health, mental health, social well-being, life meaning and purpose, educational/life goals, basic needs and safety), ultimately contributing to overall flourishing (<https://urbanstrategies.us/>).

❖❖ METHODS

The study is a summative evaluation using a posttest-only design, reflecting real-world implementation constraints. Rigor was strengthened through a theory-driven approach and convergent mixed-methods that integrate data from participants, faith-based partners, and program staff. Rather than establishing causality, the analysis focuses on assessing Urban Strategies' contribution to observed outcomes, including alignment with the theory of change, and the influence of contextual factors.

¹Latinx Funders. (2024). 2021 *dashboard*. Retrieved August 4, 2024, from https://latinxfunders.org/dashboard/sort/date_desc/years/2021/

² Krogstad, J. M., Passel, J. S., Moslimani, M., & Noe-Bustamante, L. (2023, September 22). *Key facts about U.S. Latinos for National Hispanic Heritage Month*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/22/key-facts-about-us-latinos-for-national-hispanic-heritage-month/>

³Christian Community Development Association. (n.d.). *CCD philosophy*. <https://ccda.org/about/philosophy/>



Quantitative surveys captured patterns and trends across 109 partner organizations and 892 participants⁴ spanning thirteen programs⁵ in the United States, including Puerto Rico, and El Salvador. Partner organizations had collaborated with Urban Strategies for periods ranging from one to seventeen years, while participants had completed program activities within the current or preceding year. Changes were assessed using retrospective, self-report measures, as program enrollment preceded the evaluation timeline. In addition, qualitative data were collected through interviews with 24 highly engaged Latino partnering pastors, 54 former program participants, and 14 site visits. The qualitative data provide critical context for understanding the “how” and “why” behind observed patterns, ensuring that findings are grounded in the lived experiences of Latino faith-based communities and those they serve.

◆◆ FINDINGS

Partner Capacity and Community Impact Increased

The study found that Urban Strategies’ Latino church and FBO partners possess key characteristics beneficial to community development. Partners are strategically located in high-need areas and maintain consistent contact with vulnerable populations. Their deep community embeddedness enables strong knowledge of the local context and trusted relationships with residents. Cultural and linguistic alignment further enhances their effectiveness, while their existing infrastructure supports the long-term sustainability of efforts. At the same time, Latino faith-based partners face constraints. Most reported annual budgets of \$150,000 or less, congregation sizes of 150 members or fewer, and a predominantly low socioeconomic status among their members. In addition, although leadership capacity is present, it is often constrained by competing demands - 42% of leaders are bivocational – limiting their availability for community-focused work. Consistent with these findings, interviewed partners identified resource development and leader training as ongoing technical assistance needs. These findings suggest targeted investment to address such barriers could unlock greater community impact.

Following engagement with Urban Strategies, Latino church and FBO partners’ capacity and orientation toward engaging in community work was substantially strengthened. Statistically significant gains were reported across all regions in paradigm alignment with Christian Community Development (CCD) principles (+20.4 percentage points), internal organizational capacity (+31.2), leader well-being (+21.4), and leadership processes, e.g. delegation, joint-decision making (+32.0).⁶ Interview findings underscore the significance of Urban Strategies’ contribution to these increases through training and technical assistance and the facilitation of connections to other organizations. Pastors consistently emphasized the value of partnership with Urban Strategies, with one reflecting, “After Urban Strategies, everything changed.”

Urban Strategies’ partner identification process plays a key role, engaging Latino churches and FBOs with baseline levels of capacity and motivation. A clear pattern of pre-existing motivational factors emerged with Latino pastors interviewed reporting at least one of the following: (1) experience in an additional career, (2) early mentoring or role modeling, or (3) a personal history of overcoming hardship.

⁴ The partner survey response rate was 64.9% (109 of 168). The overall participant survey response rate was 22.5% (892 of 3,964). Response rates varied by program but were at least 15% for all included programs.

⁵ Surveys were sent to partners that had collaborated with Urban Strategies through one of 13 programs and to former participants from a subset of seven programs: U.S. Region - Early Head Start, PuroPREP, PROsa, Caminando Juntos, Pulpito Fellows, and En Comunidad; El Salvador - Iglesia Segura.

⁶ Absolute values. Percentage-point increases reflect changes in the proportion of partners reporting high levels: paradigm alignment, 43.7% to 64.1%, (4–5 on a 5-point scale); organizational capacity, 38.5% to 69.7%; leader well-being, 51.5% to 72.8%; and leadership processes, 54.4% to 86.4% (7–10 on a 10-point scale).





In addition, pastors interviewed, all of whom were Latino, articulated CCD principles using their own distinct language and cultural viewpoint. Five themes emerged: an outward and local focus, a posture of dignity and empathy, a holistic and relational approach,⁷ support for community-driven solutions, and a spiritual underpinning to the work. These findings have important implications for guiding investment decisions, informing program design, and strengthening strategies to support the formation and engagement of Latino faith leaders.

Improvements in paradigm alignment and organizational capacity were accompanied by statistically significant gains in community impact. Partners reported expanding the range of their community efforts by an average of two additional effort types, with initiatives becoming increasingly holistic over time. The number of individuals reached weekly increased substantially overall, doubling on average in the continental U.S., nearly doubling in Puerto Rico, and also rising in El Salvador despite more limited resources. Significant improvements were visible across regions and among both current and past collaborating partners.

A four-factor model—including years of engagement with Urban Strategies, the percentage of congregants residing in the immediate neighborhood, annual budget size, and congregation size—was predictive of increased community impact in the continental U.S., including both the variety of community efforts and the number of individuals reached weekly. Years partnering with Urban Strategies consistently emerged as an important factor across most contexts. In Puerto Rico, they were associated with both the variety of efforts and weekly reach, while in the continental U.S. they were associated with the variety of community efforts undertaken. In El Salvador, annual budget size emerged as the primary factor associated with increased community impact.

Qualitative findings suggest the presence of a positive self-reinforcing capacity building cycle among highly engaged partners, in which expanded community efforts led to increased credibility and growth, attracted resources, and thereby strengthened long-term capacity to engage in community work.

These findings position Urban Strategies as a strategic investment and demonstrate that Latino churches and FBOs, when appropriately supported, can achieve measurable results and sustain—and in some cases expand—their community impact over time.

Participants Experienced Meaningful Gains in Flourishing

Increases in partner capacity and community efforts occurred alongside improvements in program participant outcomes. Participants reported statistically significant increases in flourishing across populations, programs, and regions. Adult respondents and parents reporting on their children indicated an average increase in overall flourishing of 13% of the total scale range, while adolescent gains ranged from 14.8% to 16% of the total scale range, depending on the instrument.⁸ In addition, the overwhelming majority of respondents stated that the program contributed “a lot” or was “the main reason for most improvements.”⁹

⁷Holistic reflects a whole-person approach, integrating physical, relational, and spiritual dimensions of flourishing. CCDA employs the term “wholistic.” See Wholistic Approach » Christian Community Development Association

⁸Percent change reflects the mean difference between retrospective pre-program and current scores, expressed as a percentage of each instrument’s total scale range. Mean scores increased from 77.95 to 93.95 (Adult Flourishing), 9.41 to 11.03 (Child Flourishing Index), 43.82 to 50.00 (Adolescent Flourishing), and 31.73 to 37.49 (Adolescent Contextual Well-being).

⁹How much do you think the program helped to improve your life? 1) Not at all (2) A little (3) Some (4) A lot

(5) It was the main reason for most improvements. Percentages reporting “A lot” or “the main reason for most improvements:” Adolescents: 76.8%, Adults: 90.1%, Parents of Young Children reporting on their child: 97.2%



Gains were particularly robust in social well-being, mental health, and life meaning and purpose while positive changes were also reported across other domains, including physical health, educational or life goals, basic needs and safety. Qualitative findings further illustrated these outcomes, with participants sharing concrete examples of change such as strengthened relationships, improved emotional regulation, increased school readiness, greater employment and economic stability, and the prevention of abuse. As one youth participant reflected, “My relationship with my parents [improved], because there was no form of communication [before]. Now we communicate. There haven’t been arguments.” Similarly, a church leader shared, “I don’t think I could still be in ministry if I didn’t do it [the program] because I was fried.”

Increases in life meaning and purpose included enhanced spiritual well-being and a growing outward focus on community engagement. In some cases, this shift extended further, with participants moving from receiving support to actively contributing to their communities. As one pastor described, youth participants, “formed a group called *Dirección Juvenil* (Youth Leadership) ... They became motivated to serve more and become agents of change in the community.” These findings suggest that expanded and enhanced community efforts are not only improving individual well-being and overall flourishing but also fostering a growing sense of agency and contribution among community members.

Unique Contributions of Latino Faith-based Partners

The evaluation findings suggest several unique contributions of Latino churches and FBOs to community development efforts. Participants described these institutions as trusted gateways that expand access to programs and encourage engagement among individuals who might not otherwise participate. They also reported that Latino faith-based settings offer shared values and a sense of familiarity that promote comfort and openness, particularly when sensitive topics are addressed. Their relational, culturally aligned approach—rooted in *personalismo*¹⁰ and *collectivism*¹¹—also appears to support significant gains in social and mental well-being. At the same time, by offering an ongoing supportive community, these settings have the potential to help participants maintain these improvements over time. Finally, in notable cases, Latino faith-based contexts fostered a sense of life meaning and purpose, providing pathways for participants to not only receive services but become agents of community transformation.

¹⁰The prioritization of warm and caring interpersonal relationships over other competing priorities; Davis, R. E., Lee, S., Johnson, T. P., & Rothschild, S. K. (2019).

¹¹Marín, G., & Marín, B. V. (1991). *Research with Hispanic Populations*. Sage Publications.





◆◆ CONCLUSION

These findings underscore the value of partnerships with Latino churches and FBOs in community-focused work, and the key contribution of Urban Strategies in strengthening and scaling these efforts. The partnership model presents funders with a compelling opportunity to invest in culturally grounded approaches that engage Latino faith-based partners as trusted community anchors. Strategic investments in Latino churches and FBO capacity, infrastructure, and leadership can yield measurable gains in both community impact and participant flourishing across multiple generations. Beyond strengthening immediate service delivery, such investment in faith-based partnerships can activate a self-reinforcing cycle in which increased community engagement builds credibility, attracts additional resources, and sustains, or even expands, reach over time. Results among participants also highlight the importance of a “whole-person” approach, elevating flourishing, particularly life meaning and purpose, mental health and social connection as core outcomes. Notably, the dynamic where participants transition from receiving support to contributing to their communities offers a promising pathway for activating residents and transforming communities. Taken together, these findings provide a compelling, evidence-informed case for funders seeking high-impact, sustainable, and equity-driven investment strategies in Latino communities.

◆◆ SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

◆ Finding #1:	Recommendations
Latino church and faith-based organization partners demonstrate key characteristics that are beneficial to community efforts. These include location in high-need geographic areas, consistent contact with vulnerable populations, strong community embeddedness, cultural and linguistic alignment, and long-term sustainability.	• While Latino church and faith-based organization partners demonstrate strong structural, relational, and contextual assets for effective community work, many face financial constraints that limit their efforts. Strategic investment—such as funding, infrastructure support, and resource development—would significantly enhance their ability to expand community impact.
◆ Finding #2:	
Latino church and faith-based organization partners demonstrate key characteristics associated with the capacity of churches and faith-based organizations to carry out community-based efforts, while also facing important economic constraints.	Given that many partners already possess foundational capacity (e.g., facilities, geographic proximity, volunteer networks), targeted financial support represents a strategic opportunity to maximize returns on investment and sustain long-term community benefits.



● Finding #3:	Recommendations
<p>Church and faith-based organization partners reported a statistically significant increase in paradigm alignment and capacity following involvement with Urban Strategies. Many interviewed possessed a baseline level of these qualities on entry, with perspectives and capabilities later strengthened through Urban Strategies' support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •To increase organizational capacity, Latino faith-based partners can benefit from training and technical assistance focused on resource development strategies tailored to the strengths of Latino churches and FBOs, as budget size was linked to higher levels of capacity. Another area that continues to be of interest to partners is support in the training and development of leaders and volunteers, including emerging young leaders, in leadership and program implementation skills.
● Finding #4:	Recommendations
<p>Partnering Latino pastors expressed Christian Community Development principles through their own distinct language and cultural perspectives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •To strengthen alignment with Christian Community Development principles, the sector should consider developing a culturally responsive adaptation for the evangelical Latino church context, grounded in the language and values of its pastors. This approach may deepen paradigm alignment and serve to inform refinements to the original set of CCD principles.
● Finding #5:	Recommendations
<p>Motivation to engage in community efforts appears to be a pre-existing characteristic among highly engaged partners, although Urban Strategies contributes to reinforcing and sustaining this motivation.</p> <p>Nearly every pastor interviewed described at least one of three motivational factors: experience with an additional career, early mentoring or role modeling, or a personal history of overcoming hardship.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •To increase motivation to engage in holistic community work among Latino faith-based leaders, further study and pilot programs should consider exploring targeted strategies for leadership development and support. This may include pilot efforts focused on early career mentoring and modeling, leadership pathways that integrate preparation in another career, and supports that help leaders process and channel personal experiences of hardship into sustainable community engagement. •Given the exploratory nature of these findings, further research and pilot initiatives are recommended to better understand how these factors can guide investment decisions and be effectively incorporated into program design and partner and leader development strategies.





● **Finding #6:**

Latino church and FBO partners reported statistically significant increases in both the variety of community efforts and the average number of individuals impacted weekly since involvement with Urban Strategies. These patterns were consistent across regions, and among both current and past collaborating partners.

● **Finding #7:**

A self-reinforcing cycle of capacity-building emerged from interviews with highly engaged partners. As partners expand their community efforts, they gain greater visibility, credibility, and growth. These gains, in turn, help mobilize additional resources and strengthen organizational capacity, enabling partners to sustain or expand their community efforts.

● **Finding #8:**

Increases in the variety of community efforts and the number of individuals served were associated with a multi-factor model that includes organizational characteristics and engagement with Urban Strategies in the continental U.S. Notably, length of engagement with Urban Strategies emerged as a key predictor in multiple contexts.

Recommendations

- Funders should prioritize investment in faith-based partners, given demonstrated and sustained returns in community impact. They should note that partners have not only increased their community impact in measurable ways across all regions, but increases have been sustained over time even among past collaborating partners, likely as a result of a self-reinforcing capacity-building feedback loop. Further study as to the mechanics of the self-reinforcing cycle, and the role of Urban Strategies is merited.
- Given the demonstrated organizational benefits associated with community engagement—including increased reach, congregational growth, and resource attraction—Latino church and FBO partners should reframe community work “beyond the four walls” as a core strategy for long-term organizational vitality and sustainability, rather than as an auxiliary activity.

Recommendations

- Funders should consider investment in Urban Strategies as key, as it was a factor that alone could predict certain types of increases in community impact. Funders should also recognize that Urban Strategies’ partnership model and potential impact operate within a broader system that includes organizational capacity and contextual conditions.
- Capacity-building efforts should assess and strengthen the areas in the multi-factor model to maximize long-term impact.
- Given that financial resources were a significant predictor of increased community reach in El Salvador, efforts to increase impact among faith-based partners in that context should prioritize resource mobilization, including support for partner fundraising, grant access, and external funding development.



<p>● Finding #9:</p> <p>Participants of all ages reported a statistically significant improvement in flourishing across programs and locations, with an average increase ranging from 13 to 16%.</p>	<p>Recommendations</p> <p>See recommendations for Findings 6 and 7.</p>
<p>● Finding #10:</p> <p>While statistically significant increases were seen across all areas of flourishing, the most prevalently reported across programs were gains in social well-being, mental health, and life meaning and purpose.</p>	<p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because social well-being, mental health, and life meaning and purpose are strengths of the Urban Strategies partnership model—and align well with partners’ natural emphasis on relationship-building and outward-focused volunteerism—funders focused on enhancing these domains in high need communities should strategically invest in community efforts that engage faith-based partners.
<p>● Finding #11:</p> <p>Participants and partnering pastors also noted progress towards educational and life goals, improvement in meeting basic needs, and increases in safety, and physical health.</p>	<p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of basic needs is a major focus for many faith-based partners. Strategies to strengthen faith-based community development should consider how to balance genuine needs in the community, with the integration of a more horizontal, relational, and development-based approach consistent with Christian Community Development principles.
<p>● Finding #12:</p> <p>The unique contribution of church and faith-based partners is difficult to isolate. However, some unique roles suggested by this study are a trusted gateway to programs, an enhancer of social well-being and mental health, a long-term community of support, and a contributor to life meaning and purpose. In this last role, the church is a place where one may start as a recipient of services and become an agent of community transformation.</p>	<p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith-based community development initiatives can strengthen their appeal to funders by highlighting the unique role of the Latino church in Finding 12 — particularly the provision of long-term communities of support and spaces where individuals can become agents of community transformation.



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