

Faith And Service Technical Education Network^a

Research Briefs from Related Projects Connecting Faith to Service

Target Audience: Congregational leaders and those leaders in social service agencies who work with Protestant Christian volunteers

“You ask me why do I keep doing this? Because each child I tutor is Jesus. If I want to serve Jesus, the scripture says that we should care for ‘least of these.’ And if they learn to read better or do math better, well that’s just icing on the cake. My job is for this child to feel the love of Jesus in the time we spend together. Then I’ve accomplished something” -
-a church volunteer in an inner-city congregation’s after-school program for community children.

Most religious communities expect followers to love their neighbors and to give themselves in service. In turn, it is through serving others that faith finds expression and is deepened. Research with volunteers in Christian congregations suggests how congregational and social service program leaders can help volunteers to make the connections between service and faith and thus strengthen their motivation to serve in ongoing, meaningful ways.

The Role of Congregations in Community Service

Almost every congregation in the United States is involved in community service programs. For every one church member that is served by that congregation, *four* community members who are *not* members of the congregation receive services. In other words, congregations don’t just exist to serve themselves—they provide four times as much service in the community as they do to one another inside the congregation. 17% of congregations’ budgets go to community ministries. And that’s just a fraction of what they provide—they open their buildings to community programs and they encourage and support their members as volunteers in community programs.¹

Congregations are also changing and deepening the work that they do in their communities. In the past, congregations have provided emergency services—short-term financial help, groceries, and clothes closets for persons in financial crisis or poverty. With devolution of government social services, congregations have become much more involved in relational social services--mentoring families going from welfare to work, diversion programs for juveniles who otherwise would go into detention centers, foster care, providing intensive job and life skills classes for the unemployed and underemployed.²

Because of their function in the community, researchers are defining congregations as “social utilities,” as community resources for addressing the social and economic needs of persons and families, particularly those who are poor or otherwise vulnerable. There is a danger, though, that the definition of the congregation as a social utility will become the way we think about religious congregations. Congregations do wonderful things—they have dinners with tablecloths and good dishes on a Thursday night and sit down with people who are homeless for a meal. They deliver meals to the homebound. They tutor children and mentor teenagers who might otherwise fail in school. They teach computer literacy and workplace skills to young single mothers so they can find decent jobs. Their motivation comes, however, because they are called by God, because it is

¹ Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001; Cnaan 1997, 1999, 2002.

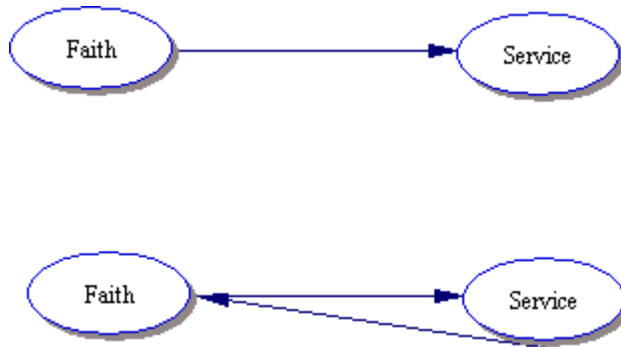
² Wineburg, 2001; and Sherman 1997, 2000, 2002.

a means of expressing and living their faith. Dorothy Day taught that one cannot understand the caring of Christians without understanding the life of the spirit that is in dynamic interaction with that caring.

“We feed the hungry, yes. We try to shelter the homeless and give them clothes, but there is strong faith at work; we pray. If an outsider who comes to visit us doesn’t pay attention to our praying and what that means, then he’ll miss the whole point.”³

Moreover, the relationship between faith and service is not only interactive but also dynamic. In concluding his study of congregations actively involved in Christian social services in their communities, Carl Dudley wrote:

Not only can faith produce social ministry, but social ministry can produce—or at least enhance—faith. Leaders can build on the experiences of members to strengthen the social ministry of the church. Moreover, when individual members experience the kinds of impact and growth that we have seen, they bring back with them seeds of renewal in the church as well.⁴



Why Community Service is an Important Focus for Congregational Leaders

Service is clearly a significant component of the Christian lifestyle and therefore important to church leaders. There are three very practical reasons congregational leaders need to involve their members in service, beyond the theological reasons.⁵

- *Involving persons in service may increase their involvement in the congregation and increase their financial giving.* Research shows that those who are personally involved in community ministry are not only more likely to volunteer time to help others, provide hospitality to strangers, and participate in activities promoting social justice, but also more likely to pray, attend worship service, and give financially to the church.
- *Involvement in service is more effective in strengthening faith than attending worship services more than once a week.* Those who participate regularly in community ministry once a week score higher on measures of faith than do those who go to congregational

³ Forest, 1995, p. 22.

⁴ Dudley, 1996, p. 10.

⁵ These findings are based on surveys of 850 faith-motivated volunteers we studied in 36 Protestant Christian congregations (and the other 6450 congregants who did not indicate that they were involved in community service).

worship and programs more than once a week but are not involved in serving. That doesn't mean that the number of worship services needs to be limited! Rather, congregants need to understand that attending congregational activities multiple times a week cannot be a substitute for being involved in service to others.

- *The more congregants work with persons who are different from themselves on the variables of race, income, education, personal habits, disabilities, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and political beliefs, the more likely they are to score higher on measures of faith.* Learning to know persons who are different from them and understand their life situations broadens volunteers' perspectives and perhaps unsettles their understanding of social forces such as poverty, racism, and other forms of injustice. In turn, they think about and engage more deeply in the practices of faith such as generosity, prayer, worship, and study of Holy Scriptures.

How to Strengthen the Impact of Service on the Faith-Life of Volunteers

The primary goal of social service programs is to improve the situations of program recipients, of course. But strengthening the faith of volunteers is also an important goal, since volunteers are an ongoing needed and precious resource. Research with congregational volunteers points to some practical steps congregational leaders and social service providers can take to nurture and strengthen volunteers' commitment to serve. Not all voluntary service experiences are equal in their ability to challenge and deepen faith and the volunteer's commitment to service. Here are some things *you* can do to strengthen the impact of service on the faith-life of volunteers:

1. Challenge members to get involved in community ministry as a *required*, not an elective, practice of the faith. Sermons and the educational programs of the congregation, for both adults and children, can emphasize service as a necessary outgrowth of faith, grounded in the teachings of Holy Scripture. Then provide an array of opportunities in which congregants can engage. Appoint someone to be the "broker" between the congregation's volunteers and the needs of the community. In addition to mission opportunities through the congregation itself, seek out opportunities for volunteers in the faith-based and public social service agencies and public and private schools. Tell the stories of volunteers who are already involved in the community's social service programs as "ambassadors" from the congregation. Provide levels of engagement. Some people may be able to give one Saturday a month or every two months; others may be able to be involved once a week or even more in an after-school tutoring or sports program for inner city children. Everybody can do something.
2. Make that array of opportunities a continuum that moves members from one-shot or short-term ministries (great places to begin) into involvement sustained over time. Many congregations are making annual mission trips to distant cities where they may spend a week refurbishing a building for a social service or providing a camping experience for inner-city children. These are great experiences for volunteers who learn that their efforts can make a real difference and to experience the joy of service. Follow this kind of experience with opportunities closer to home for ongoing involvement. Most congregations do not have to get on a bus and travel to a distant city to find people in need; look for the needs nearby. Those excited by building in Habitat for Humanity project once a year may be excited to be engaged in low-income housing development in their own communities. Those who loved doing a weeklong camp somewhere else may enjoy regularly tutoring or leading activities in an inner-city after-school program.

3. Whenever possible, define volunteer jobs in ways that create relationships between the volunteer and the service recipient. Services such as delivering meals to the same people every week or tutoring the same child over a period of time are more rewarding and significant for faith formation of volunteers than office work or sorting clothes for a clothes closet or other non-relationship kinds of service. Developing a relationship with another person whose life situation, at least on the face of things, seems so different challenges the volunteer's beliefs about what causes poverty and other social problems. That kind of challenge is not as likely to occur when stuffing envelopes for a mass mailing or writing emergency food vouchers for persons in poverty who have run short of food stamps for the month. Sometimes, of course, volunteers need to play these "behind the scenes" roles, either because the job needs to be done or because they are more comfortable in that role than working directly with people. The focus, though should always be on matching the strengths of the volunteer with the appropriate role and not just finding a way to get the office work done.
4. Make community ministry an integral part of the life of the church—worship, Bible study, prayer—and of your life as well. Congregational leaders who are involved and visible in the ministries in the community will know what is happening and be able to connect the congregation's life together with its service in the community. Name the ministries of the church often in times of prayer. Use examples and stories from the ministry or the work of volunteers in the community in sermons and the study of scripture. Be clear yourself and with listeners that you have changed names and identifying information so that you are not seen as breaking the privacy of the recipients.
5. Always wrap volunteer service with specific prayer for the work and a time for sharing experiences, reflecting together on those experiences (conversation among volunteers as well as with congregational leaders), and Bible study related to the work. Meet back at the church for pizza and prayer. Gather mentors and tutors at least once a month for dinner together and sharing stories of their work, and pray for one another. Those volunteers who have these opportunities to reflect on the relationship of their faith and their service score higher on measures of faith than those who have not given thought to this connection. One congregation requires all volunteers to be involved in a discipleship class as a part of the volunteering. In that class, they pray and study scriptures about Jesus' own ministry and how their voluntarism fits with the teachings of scripture. These groups help sustain volunteers when confronted with the overwhelming needs of their inner-city community. This is education at its best!
6. As a part of the study together, lead volunteers to recognize and respond to the social and economic systems that contribute to the problems they are facing. Find ways to respond to systemic problems as well as to their impact in the lives of individuals. One congregation found that people were consistently running out of food toward the end of the month and so were "regular customers" for food vouchers. At first, volunteers assumed that it was just bad money management on the part of service recipients, and so they started a short budgeting course for everyone who asked for a food voucher. As they came to know the situations of the people they served, however, they learned that there was no transportation to the suburban grocery stores and community residents were forced to shop in the inner-city groceries with prices far higher than anywhere else in the city. As a stopgap measure, the congregation began sponsoring a weekly shopping trip in the church van for community residents without transportation. They also began to petition the city for better mass transportation. And they approached the president of the company that owns the suburban groceries, a member of the congregation, asking for a grocery store to be opened in the inner city and promising congregational support.
7. Help volunteers to recognize that this is Christian discipleship, an opportunity to learn,

and that they should not expect to be the answer to the complexity of problems they may face. All too often, volunteers expect immediate change in the lives of service recipients. That single mother, with a little encouragement, will work all day and put herself through community college at night so she can support herself and her children. That teenager with marginal reading skills will buckle down, and with the volunteer at his side, learn to read and excel in his high school classes. Of course, sometimes these kinds of changes do take place. But not always. And when they do take place, they are often slow, with two steps backward for every one forward. In the time of study and prayer together, emphasize the role of the volunteer as friend and supporter, no matter what the life choices of the recipient. Look at how “success” is defined in the stories of the faith. For Christians, it is clear that if success is defined by numbers of people making dramatic changes in their lives, Jesus could be considered a failure. The rich young ruler walked away; the religious leaders turned their backs on him; and at the end of his ministry, even his closest followers abandoned him. The call is for us to be a faithful presence in the lives of those who need us and whom we need, not to change their lives. That is God’s business.

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^a This is part of a series of Research Briefs from Related Projects to be released by Baylor University School of Social Work as part of a 30-month research project funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The research reported in this brief was conducted in another research project led by Baylor University and funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., "Service and Faith: The Impact on Christian Faith and Congregational Life of Organized Community Caring (2000-2003)." The research team consisted of Diana Garland, Dennis Myers, and David Sherwood (Baylor University); Paula Sheridan (Whittier College); Terry Wolfer (University of South Carolina) and Beryl Huguen (Calvin College). For more information on this project contact Diana Garland (Diana_Garland@baylor.edu). The team studied 36 congregations, each of them heavily involved in community ministry. The team surveyed the entire congregation (7300 completed surveys), then surveyed all congregants involved in Christian social ministry (850 completed surveys), and conducted in-depth interviews with leaders and with congregational volunteers. Formal reports of the project are forthcoming.