The Impact of Volunteering on Christian Faith
and Congregational Life:
The Service and Faith Project [1]

Findings from the Volunteer and Congregational Leader Interviews

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This document provides a review of initial *findings from the interviews with volunteers and congregational leaders. Other documents on this website provide the reader with more detail about the project's methodology, as well as the interview protocols used. A list of publications, where these findings have been explored in more depth, can also be located on the website.* **Do not quote or copy any of these documents without permission of the primary investigator.**

METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

The project resulted in three qualitative databases consisting of verbatim transcripts of interviews with (1) 29 congregational leaders (Appendix H); (2) 25 "volunteers," i.e., members of congregations engaged in community ministries (Appendix I); and (3) 16 families who are, as groups, engaged in community ministries (Appendix J). This document describes the findings from the volunteer and congregational leader interviews. For a detailed description of our methods and processes of analysis, see the article on this website entitled, "Understanding faith-motivated volunteerism: How a four-site research team used ATLAS-Ti to develop grounded theory."

TYPES OF COMMUNITY MINISTRY

Among these congregations, our interviews identified 53 types of community ministry. There are the usual food and clothing ministries, but examples of the diversity include

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prison ministry, gang ministry, gay and lesbian ministries, camps, micro-development, substance abuse programs, health services, services for the hearing impaired—and more. The types of community ministry were organized into five categories, from most global and least relationally intense to most particular and intense: (1) social and economic justice; (2) program development and administration; (3) emergency relief and distribution of basic necessities (e.g., food and clothing); (4) group educational programs; and (5) individual tutor, mentoring, and/or counseling. We had expected each volunteer to be engaged in one, possibly two CMs. Instead, most volunteers were engaged in an array of CMs, often comprising a complex mix of services for the recipients. To illustrate, the following quote comes from a volunteer involved in social and economic justice:

> "So, we have taken on fair trade. We have done some things with fair trade coffee and just tried to educate the parish on what fair trade is and how that affects so many people, and, um, with our pocketbook also. And then we've also done some fair labor, ah issues. We have worked with the Garment Workers' Center downtown, and we've done some picketing with the garment workers in Los Angeles. And then we've also, um, we've just, have really decided that people need to travel to areas where, where, so they can really see what corporate policy is doing to the local workers. So, so we have had, um, two trips to border links at the Arizona border at Nogales. It's a wonderful, wonderful experience, and it does, it does change lives for people to go and spend the weekend there and sleep with families who are working [in the maquiladoras]. It's a real changing experience."

The following volunteer is involved in program development and administration:

> "I also volunteer through the school year, once a week at the Souper Bowl of Caring. When it gets busy, I volunteer a little more if I can. I try very diligently to be there once a week and offer myself in whatever need they have. I am most comfortable just doing stampings, mailings. I do not—there are people who volunteer who interact with the media more than I do. That is not my venue, so I don't do that, but whatever they ask me to do, I do."

Emergency relief and distribution of basic necessities may be as simple as serving in a homeless feeding program or more complex, such as delivering food to homes:

> "A lot of times they never leave their homes unless they're going to the doctor or something like that; and the only way, a lot of times, you can reach people is by visitation and especially with delivering food. A lot of times they're, you may be the only person they may see in a month, you know, and sometimes all they want to do is have a listening ear. Sometimes they're hurting, they want to hear, they want you to pray for them. It could be anything. The people that we meet on a

weekly basis over at the food bank are sometimes young mothers who may have two or three children and no man in the house. And those are the ones that, they may or may not be Christians, and those are the ones that you're trying to reach, you're trying to reach "the lost" as they call them, because they need to know that there is a God that loves them. And as being a member of the body of Christ, that's what basically you're supposed to do. You're supposed to witness, you're supposed to go out and let them know that there is someone there that loves them. Someone who cares about them. And you can't, a lot of times instead of going from door to door, or standing on the street corner trying to reach someone, you know, you have to find ways to make yourselves available to them, you know."

Leaders talk about community ministries as being distinguished by the following characteristics that have implications for the work:

(1) the passion of one or more individuals vs. belonging to the congregation and thus continuing even when individuals come and go;

(2) vested within the congregation or a collaboration of the congregation with other congregations or organizations;

(3) the work of individuals or the work of teams of persons;

(4) developed over time as a part of the congregation's life or intentionally part of a strategic planning process;

(5) significantly different in their intensity.

These characteristics warrant further exploration.

According to congregational leaders, their congregations have become involved in community ministry in one or more of the following ways: (1) one or more members pull the congregation into a ministry; (2) the pastor has a passion or concern for a ministry; (3) one ministry leads to another; (4) past experiences drive the congregation to collaborate in a joint ministry with others; and/or (5) community needs become apparent.

HOW CONGREGATIONS CHOOSE COMMUNITY MINISTRIES

Congregational leaders assess the capacity for community ministry, often in informal ways. Assessing capacity can help the congregation avoid competition among or duplication of ministries. It can occur at the individual level and at the congregational level, i.e., administering personality profiles and gifts assessments to new members.

Congregations clearly engage in formal institutional procedures and activities that help guide organizational decision-making regarding CM. Frequently mentioned among these are conducting local community needs assessments, developing linkages with other human service or faith-based organizations in the community, and engaging in strategic planning regarding programmatic elements of a CM program—i.e., client eligibility, benefits, service delivery, staffing, and funding.

Vision for community ministry ideally is shared by multiple stakeholders in the congregation. A shared vision facilitates accountability between leaders and members and also motivates members to serve. Pastors cast the vision for CM through different venues such as worship, Christian education programs, and leadership training.

Sometimes the role of the congregation is simply that of giving permission to a ministry and its activities. Sometimes the role is more formal, i.e., bestowing official sanction. In both cases, however, the original impetus comes from personal contacts or concerns of one or more members, not from some higher structure such as a denominational agency. Perhaps this is evidence of the declining influence of denominations in congregational life and ministry. Congregations intentionally develop community ministry programs that build upon their particular geographical, theological, membership, and financial resources.

WHAT MOTIVATES LEADERSHIP IN COMMUNITY MINISTRY

Some leaders spoke of motives that related to their own priorities rather than to congregational focus.

> "It's my call. … But I really never had a real clear understanding until a few years later when the Lord called me to East Los Angeles, and I started working with young people there. And even at that point, I wasn't, I was sort of acting like a caretaker because I felt that I was, you know, waiting for my real assignment. And after the Lord started this church and I was pastoring about 150 kids, and I was really struggling with the concept of being a pastor because I didn't see myself as one. I understood the sacrifice and the commitment that a pastor requires, and I wasn't sure I was willing to make that kind of sacrifice and commitment. About two years into the ministry here, I began to struggle with God about somebody taking over this pastorate, you know. And the Lord troubled my heart, and he said, "I have a pastor. That pastor is you."

On the other hand, the stimulus for the community ministry—the external impetus that moves a congregation from internal motivation to action—almost always manifests itself in the congregation and not just in the leader or a volunteer. Even stimuli we expected to act on individuals, such as "Holy Spirit" and "emulate national leaders," impact the congregation. For example, on Baptist leader said:

> "We need to make sure that when we have an opportunity to welcome people from the community, that we're on to it, that we're prepared. That when People of Color or other people

who, White people who just live around the community, or who have been—we have now this woman who was won to Christ by a member who works in jail ministry. And so we have to make sure that those people get plugged in, that people know to welcome them, pay attention to them. But the Holy Spirit is really doing a pretty good job with that because I find that this, people—our folks—do pretty well without being told."

On initial analysis, we identified five categories of motives for community ministry named by congregational leaders: (1) theologically grounded moral obligation (a call to serve, a gift to use, obeying God, stewardship, a theology for helping); (2) response to God's love and grace (gratitude to God, worship, response to God's love); (3) personal benefit (assuage guilt, feel good, personal healing, relationship with recipients); (4) personal experience (encountering persons in need, "familiarity breeds commitment," personal misfortune; and (5) functional accomplishment (improve programming, tangible success).

SUSTAINING CONGREGATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

There are two leadership tasks. One is structuring a sustainable CM. The other is preparing and providing ongoing nurture of individuals involved.

It is much easier to get a CM started—with fewer challenges—than it is to sustain it over time, at least as leaders describe their experiences. The key may be less in creating energy to start a CM and more in creating structures and resources that start a *sustainable* CM.

In their efforts to support community ministries, congregations exhibit a dual focus. Some of these efforts are directed toward the congregation itself (internal) and others beyond the congregation (external). Of the 48 organizational support activities we identified in congregations, a majority are internal, with only nine (<19%) external. Two of these, "needs assessment" and "terminate: no need," relate to the determination of needs in the community for decisions about beginning or ending CM, respectively.

In those congregations in which leaders do support community ministry, we identified five basic categories of support:

- *Educating*: Providing a biblical/theological rationale for community ministry, identifying problems and needs in the lives of individuals and/or communities, promoting reflection on community ministry experiences, eliciting connections between faith and community ministry, and helping people interpret their community ministry experiences within a Christian framework.
- *Informing*: Announcing specific needs and opportunities for involvement in community ministry.

- *Promoting*: Encouraging participation in and support of community ministries, matching and recruiting individuals for particular ministry activities, arranging for volunteers to share about their experiences, and modeling involvement.
- *Supporting*: Praying for community ministries (including volunteers and recipients), raising funds for and/or directing congregational finances toward a community ministry, and recognizing, affirming participation in community ministry, holding people accountable for following through with their commitments.
- *Initiating*: Jump-starting involvement, taking the initiative to make or respond to contacts with other systems, and convening planning groups.

Protection against or response to burnout involves the leader framing the community ministry experience philosophically/theologically.

Leaders identified areas of significant expertise needed to lead community ministries—to build trust in the community and recipients, to deal with government and other external constraints, to circumvent the individualism that proscribes getting involved in other people's business, to develop the material resources needed, and to provide leadership and training to volunteers. This last is particularly important because often volunteers can seem quite competent but may not have skills for a particular setting or knowledge to address the overwhelming needs and systemic causes of the difficulties they face.

WHAT MOTIVATES VOLUNTEERS WHO SUSTAIN INVOLVEMENT

When leaders talk about protecting volunteers from burnout, they do not discuss their volunteers' motivation for ministry—an important factor for the volunteers themselves. Some of the volunteers are involved in very demanding and even isolated ministries, but they have managed the challenges successfully because of the motivation that sustains them.

Volunteers who have sustained themselves in relatively difficult ministries and successfully confronted the challenge of burnout fall into two groups. The first group's stimulus for involvement was modeling and encouragement in their family or from significant others. The second group has observed that community ministry can make a difference. In other words, some are sustained because it is part of their family or congregational culture, others because of the difference they see they can make—both forms of environmental stimulus sustain community ministry in the face of burnout.

Setting appropriate boundaries in regard to priorities, time, energy, personal relationships, and resources may be a challenge to engagement in community ministry. Those volunteers who talked about being challenged by boundaries—and successfully

addressing that challenge—were distinct as a group from the larger sample in that they primarily are motivated by their relationship with God—God's love, God's gifts, God's calling—and the desire to share that relationship with others. *All* of them feel a personal call to service, not just a more general calling of their congregation. The gifts that many of them feel called to use are related to their professional lives and skills, suggesting that the community ministry in which they are involved is part of a much larger vocation for them. Of the four who talked about being motivated by their gratitude to God, there is no expectation that their ministry will change the world, or even the life of the recipient. Their service is a response to God's love, not simply an attempt to create change in others. That motivation frees the volunteer from the tyranny of outcomes as the sole determination of the service's value, and perhaps, therein, is the sense of balance in these volunteers who have confronted boundaries successfully. All of these particular four are working in what could be very draining ministries—with homeless persons, persons with HIV/AIDS, and economically disadvantaged.

In the qualitative interviews, we learned that time constraints are both is a stressor, but not always perceived negatively; it is the kind of stress that can contribute to growth. Time is a "challenge," but not necessarily a barrier; these volunteers *make* time for what they perceive is important.

RESULTS OF COMMUNITY MINISTRY FOR VOLUNTEERS

We developed 150 codes to describe the results—or consequences—of the various forms of service. A sample of the types of results these leaders and volunteers named include: "own children socialized," "community renewal," "commitment to ministry," "confidence," "congregation is energized," "congregational membership increases," "de-centering of self," "faith crisis," "frustration," "goal unmet," "leader knows members better," "political networking," "staff demand," and so on.

This analysis is provided in detail in the article located elsewhere on this website entitled, "Self-reported outcomes of service in the lives of congregational volunteers."

IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY AND SERVICE RECIPIENTS

The interviews did not focus on the results of the CM for the community and the recipients of service. Nevertheless, volunteers and leaders both identify how involvement in the CM strengthened community (i.e., community renewal, reconciliation, and even creation of a new community organization). They also describe outcomes for recipients, including renewed hope, the targeted benefits of the services, and enriched lifestyles. Some recipients developed relationships with the serving congregation. Other

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volunteers and leaders also, however, describe incidences in which goals were not met, no change happened, and they felt frustrated with the lack of effectiveness.

COMMUNITY CHANGES

Eight volunteers and seven leaders across the CM spectrum describe ways that people were reconciled to one another and to God as a result of the ministry.

OUTCOMES FOR RECIPIENTS

Hope and Gratitude
Three volunteers and three leaders describe how recipients gained a sense of hope through the CM. Seven volunteers and seven leaders experience gratitude from recipients, and that gratitude keeps them involved. A leader said:

> "I get a joy. There is a, if you would, a warm-fuzzy that comes upon me when I see that something that I have done has been received in such a way to where a person is just, they're really thankful, they are really grateful, and the thought that because of something that I've done, somebody's life is going to be a bit better. And so, it, it puts that warm- fuzzy feeling that is there, um, that I relate to. What Jesus says, you know, whatever you do to the least of these. It's almost like I can see Christ smiling. You know, it's like, 'Well done.'"

But not always. Several leaders—not volunteers—point out that recipients are not always grateful:

> "Part of what we've been talking about, that's very hard for us all to understand is this element of recognition. Some of my spiritual gift classes have been talking about how even when they are in ministry when they know they have the gift to serve, they sometimes they don't feel energized from the clients. You know, from the people that they serve, that those people might not be able to say thank you. So where does that recognition or that celebration come from so that we have the energy to be motivated to go on? And, of course, part of that comes from each other in a faith community that we acknowledge to each other when we see that someone has been able to use their God-given gifts and to show God's love to another person. But what we're really trying to help us all to understand is how we celebrate that in ourselves. That if someone comes to us and says in this particular instance, let's say, 'I saw you with this person that walked in to the church who was in need of food and clothing, and I saw how you reacted to that person, how you interacted with that person and helped that person, you really showed compassion.' And what our natural tendency is, our mothers all taught us, that it's not good to be prideful, and so our natural tendency is to sort of

diminish that and to say, 'Oh, anybody could have done that, I was just there at the right time.' Whereas, if we began to really look at ourselves as the presence of God's love, what we can say to ourselves and we almost need to get to the point where we can discuss this with others in our faith community. Yes, wasn't that wonderful what God was able to do through me. And to be energized by that and to say yes that was not me of my own volition; that was God working through me, God giving me the power and the talent and gifts to do that. So there's a way to recognize and celebrate how God was able to work through us and that would really energize us and keep us centered on our purpose and connection to our own growth and maturation of faith."

Another leader also notes that the real rewards come not from the recipients but from God and from the spiritual growth and joy that comes through serving.

There is no distinction between the types of CMs in these outcomes.

Recipients Sometimes Become Volunteers
Four volunteers—all in different types of CM—and six leaders note that recipients sometimes become volunteers themselves.

Recipients Benefit
Fifteen leaders and 18 volunteers from all the types of CM except social and economic justice ministries note ways in which recipients benefit from the CM. Homeless people find homes and jobs; children do better in school; drug addicts find sobriety. Six volunteers and seven leaders describe how recipients have attended or joined the congregation; eight leaders say that recipients experienced religious conversions as a result of the CM.

No Benefit or Negative Outcomes
Two volunteers and two leaders describe a sense of failure, that the CM didn't reach its goals. Eight volunteers describe times they were frustrated because of their limited effectiveness.

ONGOING ANALYSIS

Analysis of the interview databases is continuing and will be reported in documents provided either in full on this site or as publications available elsewhere (see "Publications and Papers").

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