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

Research Questions and Methods

Diana Garland[2], Dennis Myers, and Terry Wolfer

with Beryl Hugen, Paula Sheridan, David Sherwood, Terry Wolfer[3]

This document describes the methods used in the Service and Faith Project. It includes references to the research instruments located elsewhere on this website. Other documents on this website will provide the reader with the project's findings and a full listing of publications and professional papers with sources that the project has produced. Do not quote or copy any of these documents without permission of the primary investigator.

****

The Research Questions

The project sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What model(s) can be developed to help us understand how congregations become involved in various and diverse forms of community ministry? What are the sociological, psychological, theological, organizational, and economic variables related to the choice and consequences of various forms of service?

2. What are the most salient variables in describing community ministry programs/activities and their impact on individual, family, and congregational faith?

3. What motivates individuals, families, and congregations to serve through programs and activities of community ministry? What sustains or depletes their motivation?

4. What internal leadership and external linkages do congregations create or join to respond to human need in their community? Which of these forms of leadership and linkage are most important to their sustained activity and to the meaning of that activity for the congregation and participants?

---

5. How do theology and mission interact with social environment, community characteristics, and congregational resources to shape caring?

6. What immediate and long-term impact does community ministry have on the life and faith of a congregation corporately and on its individual members and families?

7. What are the various outcomes of service for the congregation?

8. Who leads community ministry in congregations, and what is the nature of their pathway into these leadership roles? What predispositions (sense of call, values, and rewards) are they seeking to express within this ministry context? What contributes to their effectiveness?

Six research partners surveyed congregations to learn more about the relationship between service and faith. They chose a total of 35 congregations located in four research sites representing diverse regions of the United States—Michigan, South Carolina, Texas, and Southern California, with additional congregations in New York and Louisiana. In the first phase of the project, each congregation was surveyed as a whole, and in 33 congregations, members actively involved in community service completed an additional survey about their volunteer work and its relationship to their congregation and their personal beliefs, attitudes, and values. The second phase of the project involved in-depth qualitative interviews with 29 leaders, 25 volunteers, and 16 family groups within the congregation who were involved in service programs.

Sample Selection

Researchers purposefully limited the project to congregations that are urban and/or suburban rather than rural (because of the greater opportunities for involvement in formal social services rather than the more informal services of rural communities); have 150 or more active members rather than smaller congregations (because of the greater resources to support formalized ministries); are Protestant Christian (because the project was not large enough to study the diverse array of religious congregations in the United States); and are involved in at least one community social service program.

Within these boundaries, the research team sought congregations that varied in their denominational identity. Peter Dobkin Hall speaks to the diversity of factors involved in trying to understand congregations' engagement in community ministries (Hall, 1998). Indeed, the field of congregational studies has identified a number of typologies for understanding how congregations relate to their communities, determined only in part by variables such as denominational identity and political or theological orientation (e.g., Carroll, Dudley, & McKinney, 1986; Unruh, 1999a, 1999b). Because of the complexity of issues, the researchers did not attempt to sort congregations into well-defined categories but to ensure a breadth of congregational types along denominational, theological, and political dimensions.

Researchers also selected a distribution of congregations that identified themselves as white, Latino, African-American, or multi-ethnic. This was to ensure adequate diversity in the sample for studying congregational involvement in service as it may be impacted by ethnic/cultural influences, given previous research findings that black congregations are significantly more involved in community service than their white counterparts (Cavendish, 2000).

Survey Instruments

The research team developed two survey instruments for this study—the Community Ministries Congregational Survey, Part 1, and the Community Ministries Congregational Survey, Part 2. The

project uses the term "community ministry" on the survey instrument because this term is more familiar in American Protestant congregational life (e.g., Dudley, 1991; e.g., Dudley, 1996; Dudley & Van Eck, 1992). Both instruments were piloted in congregational groups and refined based on feedback from respondents. The instruments then were piloted in two congregations, one in South Carolina and one in Texas, before data collection for the study began.

Community Ministries Congregational Survey, Part 1

The first survey instrument gathers basic demographic information about congregants such as length of church membership, frequency of church attendance, age, gender, educational level, type of household, ethnicity, and employment status. It also includes the brief version of the Faith Maturity Scale[4], a 24-item, standardized instrument that assumes that faith develops over time and is shaped by maturational processes. For this scale, the core dimensions of faith are the *vertical*, or the personal transformation one experiences in the divine encounter, and the *horizontal*, or heeding the call to social service and social justice (Benson, Donahue, & Erickson, 1993). Examples of items from the vertical dimension include: "Every day I see evidence that God is active in the world"; "I seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually"; "I take time for periods of meditation and prayer"; and "I have a real sense that God is guiding me." Examples of items from the horizontal dimension include: "In my free time, I help people with problems or needs"; "I am active in efforts to promote social justice"; "I feel a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world"; and "I give significant portions of time and money to help other people." The survey instrument asks respondents to indicate how often they participate in these behaviors on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "always."

The survey also includes a list of 13 faith behaviors or "practices," based on the writings of Dykstra and Bass (Bass, 1997; Bass & Dykstra, 1997; Dykstra, 1991, 1999); the same Likert scale is used in this section as in the Faith Maturity Scale. These practices include several items directly measuring volunteer service: "providing hospitality and care to strangers," "volunteering time to help those less fortunate," and "participating in activities that promote social justice in society." Because it has been hypothesized that faith and service are mutually transactive, the extent and nature of the relationship of other faith practices to service also needs to be understood. These include: "attending weekly worship services"; "participating in Bible study activity"; "sharing the Christian story with others (evangelism)"; "studying the teachings and history of the Christian church"; "praying"; "confessing my faults to others"; "forgiving and working toward healing relationships with others"; "encouraging others, especially when they fail," "giving financial support to my church"; and "discussing Christian responses to contemporary issues with other Christians."

The final section of the Congregational Survey, Part 1, asks respondents to indicate whether or not they are involved in "community ministry," defined as "involvement in activities encouraged by your church that support the physical, material, emotional, and social well-being of people from your congregation, neighborhood, and community." The survey gives examples of community ministry such as working with a food bank or pantry, teaching reading or language, providing parenting education, working to improve laws or policies, mentoring a family living in poverty, providing services for troubled youths, and building homes for the poor.

---

[4] The name "Faith Maturity Scale" was not included in the Congregational Survey, for fear of creating bias in responses toward what respondents might perceive as greater amounts of maturity.

Respondents are asked to describe their involvement so that the research team can discern which respondents are involved in the kinds of service we have called "organized community caring." Respondents also are asked the extent to which several factors prevent their involvement in community ministries: access to transportation, family/dependent care responsibilities, work-related responsibilities, and "other" (which they are given space to "explain"). Finally, the survey asks respondents to provide contact information so that those involved in service can be provided with the second survey instrument. Both survey instruments have been translated into Spanish, and respondents can choose either version.

Congregational Survey (Part 2)

The second survey obtains detailed information about the experiences of those involved as volunteers in organized community caring programs. Open-ended questions encourage respondents to describe their "community ministries"; the kinds of people they serve (e.g., preschool children, substance abusers, homeless people); what the service involves them in doing; changes they have experienced in their values, attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyle; and finally, any changes in their faith of which they are aware as a result of their involvement.

Six checklists garner other information about their service experiences. These checklists cover preparation and training, level of congregational support, learning opportunities, the extent to which service recipients are different from volunteers, the impact of the service personally, and the relationship between service and evangelism.

The first checklist of seven items measures whether they were prepared for this work "yes, enough," "yes, but not enough," or "no training." These items include "provided information about the problem and persons in need," "provided information about program goals," "gave me written guidelines," "explained the guidelines," "trained me in helping skills," "gave me opportunity to practice the necessary skills before I began," and "other (explain)."

A second checklist asks respondents to indicate if and how their congregation supports the community ministry in which they are involved with organized prayer support, childcare or other programs for family members while the volunteer is involved, publicity for the ministry, financial support for the ministry, recognition for those involved, ongoing Bible study or other spiritual guidance related to the service activity, and "other."

A third checklist asks respondents to indicate learning opportunities they experienced as a result of their involvement. These include learning about the needs of persons who benefit from the ministry, other programs in the community that help people, the volunteer's own gifts and abilities, problems faced by other church groups who do similar ministries, networks and support groups that do similar ministries in the community, the personal life experiences of one or more people served, and other kinds of knowledge or information (describe).

A fourth checklist uses a seven-point Likert scale (from "never" to "always") for respondents to indicate the extent to which the community ministry involves working with persons different from themselves in the following ways: race and ethnicity, income, education, personal habits (style of dress, grooming, use of language), religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and political ideas. Based on the service-learning literature, this appears to be an important factor for understanding how community ministry involvement may influence volunteers (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

A fifth checklist of 16 items, using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," provides opportunity for respondents to describe the role and meaning of the community

4

ministry in their lives. The items were adapted from criteria for measuring the quality of academic service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999, pp. 189-191). Because these items relate directly to the research questions for this project, they are listed in full below:

> I do meaningful work in my community ministry.
>
> I have important responsibilities in my community ministry.
>
> My community ministry involves challenging tasks.
>
> My community ministry is in neighborhoods where I don't feel safe.
>
> I work face-to-face with the people we are caring for.
>
> I receive support from ministry leaders.
>
> Doing community ministry raises new questions for me about living the Christian life.
>
> Before the community ministry began, leaders encouraged me to think about and discuss my expectations about the work.
>
> Those of us serving in the community ministry talk about our experiences with one another.
>
> I have opportunities to discuss connections between my community ministry and biblical and church teachings.
>
> Leaders encourage critical reflection that challenges me to think in new ways about my ministry.
>
> Leaders provide me with both supportive and challenging feedback.
>
> We plan and organize the community ministry together with those receiving the ministry.
>
> Ministry leaders provide me with information about the problem(s) of those receiving the ministry.
>
> My involvement in this ministry creates stress in other areas of my life.
>
> There have been conflicts or disagreements to work through in my community ministry.

A sixth and final checklist provides opportunity for respondents to describe how they see the relationship between service and "sharing the Christian gospel" (i.e., "evangelism" or proselytizing). This relationship is a particularly salient issue for public social services programs partnering with congregational volunteers. This checklist also uses the seven-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Based on work by Unruh (1999b), the items are as follows:

> The best way to meet the needs of people is by sharing the Christian gospel with them.
>
> Meeting people's needs provides an opening for sharing the Christian gospel.
>
> Meeting people's needs is my way of sharing the Christian gospel— through what I do more than through what I say.

Meeting people's needs and sharing the Christian gospel are the same thing—like two sides of the same coin.

Working toward social change is a way to share the Christian gospel.

Community ministry is a way to make the Christian gospel more attractive to those who are "turned off" by Christianity.

Community ministry is not related to sharing the Christian gospel.

This checklist is followed by an open-ended question asking respondents to write what "sharing the Christian gospel in community ministries" means to them.

Surveying the Congregations and Volunteers

Congregations were surveyed during the years 2001-2003. The congregational survey was administered in the setting that maximized participation of the largest number of congregants, recognizing that diverse congregations have diverse cultures of participation, and that what might be the optimal setting for one congregation may not be for another. The setting for administration of the survey was guided by the leaders of the congregations in consultation with the research team. Congregational leaders perceived that the information from the survey would help them guide the relationship between service and faith, and leaders were promised a full report of the findings for their congregation. Therefore, it was in the leaders' best interest to collaborate in maximizing congregational participation. The Sunday morning worship service was the survey setting chosen for 14 of the congregations. Some congregations wove the survey into the actual worship time; others administered it at the end of the worship service. In all cases, the first survey was collected at the time of administration.

Distributing the second survey instruments was more challenging, because it meant determining who met the criteria of involvement in organized community caring. Congregational leadership and sometimes support staff were involved in distributing and collecting the second survey, which was sealed for review only by the research team.

Interviewing Congregational Leaders and Volunteers

In addition to the surveys, the research team conducted in-depth interviews lasting from one to two hours each with 29 congregational leaders and 25 individual volunteers who had been involved in community service programs. Congregational leaders identified volunteers in their congregations for interview. The researchers were not seeking a random sample of all volunteers but rather volunteers who represented as much diversity as possible demographically, theologically, and in the types of services in which they were engaged. Seventeen of the 25 individual volunteers were female and 8 were male. Eighteen were white, 5 were African-American, and 2 were Latino. The median age for the individual volunteers was 53 with a range from 30 to 85. Their congregations were Evangelical Protestant (n =14) (e.g., Southern Baptist, Cooperative Baptist, Missionary Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Christian Reformed, Assemblies of God, nondenominational) and Mainline Protestant (n =11) (e.g., United Methodist, Presbyterian USA, Episcopal). Open-ended interviews included questions about the nature of the service, the volunteer's motivations for serving, factors that sustain or create barriers for service, ways in which their congregations do and do not support their involvement, the relationship of the service to volunteers' faith practices, and the impact of the service on their lives. Interviews lasted from one to two hours and were recorded and transcribed.

With 25-35 single-spaced pages of text per interview, the interview databases include more than 2,000 pages of transcripts. The six research team members worked individually, coding and developing new codes for their own and one another's interview transcripts, then presenting their work to one another in lengthy conference calls that required consensus on the code list before going to the next round of individual work, with the goal of developing theory grounded regarding the experiences of interviewees (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Weiss, 1994). Each interview was coded both by the researcher who conducted the interview and by another member of the team, using the software package ATLAS-Ti. With periodic pauses, the team continued a rhythm of coding and phone conferences on a biweekly basis for more than two years. This process resulted in 725 carefully defined codes organized into 25 major categories (e.g., volunteer motives, ministry types, congregational supports, results). Our analytic methods have been reported in full elsewhere (Garland, O'Connor, Wolfer, & Netting, forthcoming).

With periodic pauses, the team continued a rhythm of coding and phone conferences on a biweekly basis for more than two years. This process resulted in 725 carefully defined codes. As we worked, we began grouping the codes, with the group designated a "parent code." For example, the parent code "challenges" included a set of codes that described the various challenges or barriers volunteers and leaders faced in their community ministries. Eventually, each of the 725 codes in the database was connected to one of the 25 parent codes. Examples of often-used codes include:

Congregational Organizational Support: A variety of institutionalized policies, procedures, activities, and/or resources offered by congregations as ways to organize to enrich, increase, and/or sustain congregation members' involvement in community ministry. N=51 codes, e.g., "official sanction," "publicity," "material resources," "permission giving," "training."

Faith practices: Activities characteristic of Christian faith and congregational life derived from and given meaning by Christian scripture, theology, and tradition. N=34 codes. E.g., "forgiving," "Bible study," "prayer," "tolerating," "perseverance," "suffering with," "encouraging."

Motive: Psychological factors that propel congregational (and individual member) involvement in community ministry. These reflect personal agency (e.g., intentionality, desire). Can be in response to external stimuli. N=72 codes, e.g., "called to serve," "evangelism," "feels good," "gift to use," and "guilt."

Philosophy: Broad rationales for congregational involvement in community ministry. N=41 codes, e.g., "person in need trumps issues," "equipping laity," "evangelism," "holistic ministry."

Results: Outcomes of a congregation's involvement in community ministry. N=121 codes, e.g., "compassion for marginalized," "confidence," "fear overcome," "helping leads to more helping," "joy," and "recipient benefits."

Stimulus: Environmental and relational factors (rather than motive codes that are psychological) that are the catalyst for community ministry involvement by individuals and/or congregations. N=30 codes, e.g., "church teaching," "family," "location," "need: local," and "retirement."

Other documents on this website summarize the findings from this project.

References

Bass, D. C. (1997). Keeping sabbath. In D. C. Bass (Ed.), *Practicing our faith: A way of life for a searching people* (pp. 75-89). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bass, D. C., & Dykstra, C. (1997). Growing in the practices of faith. In D. C. Bass (Ed.), *Practicing our faith: A way of life for a searching people* (pp. 195-204). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Benson, P. L., Donahue, M. J., & Erickson, J. A. (1993). The Faith Maturity Scale: Conceptualization, measurement, and empirical validation. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion, 5*, 1-26.

Carroll, J. W., Dudley, C. S., & McKinney, W. (Eds.). (1986). *Handbook for congregational studies*. Nashville: Abingdon.

Cavendish, J. C. (2000). Church-based community activism: A comparison of Black and White Catholic congregations. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 39*(3 (September)), 371-384.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Dudley, C. S. (1991). *Basic steps toward community ministry*. Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute.

Dudley, C. S. (1996). *Next steps in community ministry*: Alban.

Dudley, C. S., & Van Eck, T. (Eds.). (1992). *Social ideology and community ministries: Implications from church membership surveys*.

Dykstra, C. (1991). Reconceiving practice. In B. Wheeler & E. Farley (Eds.), *Shifting Boundaries:Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox.

Dykstra, C. (1999). *Growing in the life of faith: Education and Christian practices*. Louisville: Geneva Press.

Garland, D. R., O'Connor, M. K., Wolfer, T., & Netting, E. (forthcoming). Team-based research: Notes from the field. *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice*.

Hall, P. D. (1998). Religion and the post-welfare state. *Religion in the News, 1*(1), 6-8.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Unruh, H. R. (1999a). *Perceptions of religious meaning in faith-based social services.* Paper presented at the Paper presented at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Boston MA, November 5, 1999.

Unruh, H. R. (1999b). *Saving souls, saving society: The role of evangelism in church-based social ministries.* Paper presented at the Paper presented for the Religious Research Association Conference, Boston, November 6, 1999.

Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: Free Press.

Revised: November 28, 2005—DRG