

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

Snapshots of Findings Organized by Research Questions

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*This document provides a very brief overview of some of the findings the Service and Faith Project, organized by research questions. Other documents on this website will provide the reader with more detail about the project's methodology and its findings. **Do not quote or copy any of these documents without permission of the primary investigator.***

Research Assumptions

The project proceeded upon and tested the following assumptions:

1. Community ministry may inform and enhance faith. Different forms of community ministry have different kinds of impact on individual, family, and community faith.
2. Organized community caring may lead to greater amounts of altruism and community involvement beyond the specific experience of service. Different forms of community ministry have different kinds of impact on altruism and community involvement.
3. Community ministry fits the mission of congregations of growing the faith of members and of serving those in need.
4. Congregations vary in their potential for various kinds of formal and informal community ministry.
5. Matching and leading congregations in community ministry that fits their resources and their self-identified mission builds their capacity for further service.
6. Social service professionals need to understand the complexity of congregations and their missions and culture in order to relate most effectively to them. Congregations cannot be reduced to public utilities.
7. Congregations and their members see community ministry as the fulfillment of their mission, and any new opportunity for service needs to be connected to that mission.

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The Sample

The sample included congregations with diverse denominational identities and affiliations: Baptist (including Southern Baptist, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, National Baptist, and Missionary Baptist) (n=9); Christian Reformed (n=7); United Methodist (n=5); “nondenominational” (n=3); Episcopal (n=3); Presbyterian (n=3); Assemblies of God (n=2); Lutheran (n=1); Seventh Day Adventist (n=1); and African Methodist Episcopal (n=1). Researchers also selected a distribution of congregations that were predominantly Anglo-American (n=18), Latino (n=5), African-American (n=9), or multiethnic, with no dominant ethnic group (n=3). The analysis of findings from 35 congregations is based on the 7,403 responses on the congregational survey. Nearly half of the respondents (46.5%, n=3,444) reported being personally involved in community service activities. Of these, 946 (27%) completed the follow-up volunteer survey. Comparisons between congregational members who were and were not involved in community service are based on responses to the congregational survey. The research team also conducted in-depth interviews with 25 volunteers and 29 congregational leaders.

Findings Organized by Research Questions

Each research question is followed by some of the findings from the project. The letters in *italics* indicate the data from which the finding is drawn, as follows;

- I: Interview with volunteers and congregational leaders
- CS Survey of all congregational attenders
- VS Survey of those who indicated on the congregational survey that they are volunteers in an organized community service program

This summary of research funding is meant to give snapshots. For a more thorough exploration of findings, see other documents on this website and the list of publications from this project.

Research Question 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?

- (I) Among these congregations, our interviews identified 53 types of community ministry. There are the usual food and clothing ministries, but examples of the diversity of ministries include prison ministry, gang ministry, gay and lesbian ministries, camps, micro-development, substance abuse programs, health services, services for the hearing impaired—and more.
- (I) Congregational leaders assess the capacity for community ministry, often in informal ways. One of the dangers that assessing capacity can help the congregation avoid is competition among ministries. Assessing capacity may take place at the individual level as well as at the congregational level—administering personality profiles and gifts assessments to new members.
- (I) Vision for community ministry may originate from leaders and/or pastor and 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.

- (I) At times, 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 of official sanction. In both cases, however, the original impetus comes from personal contacts or concerns of one or more members, not some higher structure such as a denominational agency. Could this be a result of or a contribution to the declining influence of denominations in congregational life and ministry?
- (I) 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.
- (I) Congregations intentionally develop community ministry programs that build upon the geographical, theological, membership, and financial resources of their specific congregation.
- (I) 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 those 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.

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

- (VS) We tested the variables of the Volunteer Involvement Risk/Intensity Scale (Raymond, 2002). The scale asserts that (1) the greater the intensity, (2) the greater the duration (length of time), (3) the greater the risk (e.g., relating to persons different from self or going outside of familiar territory), and (4) the greater the complexity (e.g., from working with food or used clothing to serving people to social action), then the greater the impact on the volunteers. Only 11% of the variance in faith reported by volunteers is explained by all of the independent variables of race, gender, age, and education. On the other hand, three variables of the community ministry are related significantly to volunteers' reporting a change in their faith as a consequence of their involvement: (1) *whether or not it is an adult ministry* (those volunteers working in adult ministries are almost three times as likely to report awareness in faith change than are those working with children—working with adults different from self presumably feels more “risky”); (2) *congregational preparation* (the more preparation—instead of just being “thrown out there”—the less likely volunteers are to be aware of change in faith); and (3) *location* (when community ministry occurs on church property, volunteers are 30% less likely to report an awareness of change in faith than when the ministry occurs away from the church).
- (VS) Nearly 80% of the volunteers (n=754) report that they relate directly to recipients. When asked how frequently they encounter recipients who differ from them in ethnicity, income,

education, personal habits, physical/emotional challenges, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or political ideas, the normative pattern is that approximately 45% report that they often, almost always, or always do. This level of difference does not exist when the source of difference is sexual orientation; only 16% report working with service recipients who have a sexual orientation different from their own.

- (I) The interviews confirmed the findings from the surveys. Most outcomes of service are positive—e.g., developing assertiveness, relying on others and on God, overcoming fears, deepening faith, giving and receiving respect, understanding the problems better, etc. If volunteers want to experience the “fruit” of helping in positive outcomes/changes for themselves, then, they need to move beyond the edges of their own comfort into relationships even if initially they may create fear and or at least uncertainty.
- (I) In the interviews, we learned that time constraints are both a negative stress and a positive challenge for volunteers. These volunteers *make* time for what they perceive is important.
- (VS) We found robust correlations of the Faith Maturity Scale and our Faith Practices Scale with three dimensions of service-learning: (1) feeling that the ministry is meaningful; (2) talking about the experience with others; and (3) the creation of stress in other areas of life.

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

- (CS) *Education appears to be related to volunteering:* At least 65% of volunteers have at least a baccalaureate degree, which suggests a strong relationship between CM involvement and higher education attainment of volunteers. The number of volunteers with a baccalaureate degree (35%) is significantly larger than the number of nonvolunteers with the degree (25%).
- (CS) *Education may motivate in different ways:* College graduates score higher on Faith Maturity Scale, which contains more philosophical statements, than they did on the Faith Practices Scales, which are actions of faith.
- (CS) *Age appears to be related to volunteering:* The average age of volunteers is 50 ($n=926$; $SD=16.02$), which is significantly higher than nonvolunteers, 43 on average ($n=2521$; $SD=18.15$)
- (CS) *The longer the congregational membership, the more likely one is to volunteer:* Volunteers have been members of the same congregation for 14 years ($n=899$; $SD=13$), which is significantly longer than nonvolunteers, who have been members for 12 years ($n=2369$; $SD=12$).
- (VS) *Volunteers receive various forms of congregational support for their involvement:* Most often, congregations financially (75.7%) and promotionally (79.6%) supported the programs in which volunteers are involved. Almost three-quarters of volunteers received congregational recognition for their involvement (73.3%). A majority (56%) received organized prayer support. Surprisingly, [emotional word] less than one-third (30%) are supported in their work by Bible study or other spiritual guidance related to their volunteer ministry.
- (VS) Community service provided these volunteers with opportunity to learn more about themselves, the community they serve, and the recipients of their care. They learned most about the needs of others and about their own gifts and abilities; they learned least about the experiences of others—other church groups, networks, and support groups—involved in similar ministries.

- (VS) Volunteers say they “often” feel supported by ministry leaders (5.29 on seven-point scale), and that their work sometimes “raises new questions for me about living the Christian life” (4.32). They “sometimes” talk about their experiences with other volunteers (4.53) and discuss connections between their ministry and biblical and church teachings (4.04). This kind of support is less likely to come from church leaders. Only “once in a while” do leaders encourage them to think about and discuss their expectations or to reflect critically about their experiences (3.34). Moreover, although ministry leaders “sometimes” (4.14) provide these volunteers with supportive and challenging feedback, they less often provide them with information about the problems of those receiving the ministry (3.9). Volunteers also report that only “once in a while” (3.14) do they plan and organize the community ministry together with those receiving the ministry. In other words, the service more likely is provided *to* rather than collaboratively *with* its recipients.

Research Question 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?

- (I) 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 create a *sustainable* CM. There may be enthusiasm initially, but challenges emerge over time.
- (I) There are two leadership tasks. One is structuring a sustainable CM. The other is preparing and providing ongoing nurture of individuals involved.
- (I) Congregations clearly engage in formal institutional procedures and activities that help guide organizational decision-making regarding CM. Frequently mentioned among these include conducting local community needs assessments, developing linkages with other local 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.
- (I) 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.

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

- (VS) The project evaluated the nature of the connection between evangelism, or “sharing the Christian gospel,” and community service programs, using a Likert scale with the following points: 1 (strongly disagree); 2 (disagree); 3 (slightly disagree); 4 (no opinion); 5 (slightly agree); 6 (agree); 7 (strongly agree). The item with the highest mean agreement score (6.23) was the one in which meeting people’s needs “provides an opening for sharing the Christian gospel.” Items with which these volunteers agreed included: “community service is a way to make the Christian gospel more attractive to those who are ‘turned off’ by Christianity” (5.83); “meeting people’s needs is my way of sharing the Christian gospel—through what I do more than through what I

say” (5.79); and “working toward social change is a way to share the Christian gospel” (5.42). The statement these volunteers disagreed with most was “community ministry is not related to sharing the Christian gospel” (1.66). Other items included “the best way to meet the needs of people is by sharing the Christian gospel with them” (4.83) and “meeting people’s needs and sharing the Christian gospel are the same thing—like two sides of the same coin” (5.07). Clearly, these volunteers see a direct relationship between their service and the sharing of their faith. The church is not just another venue for community involvement; congregational volunteers serve as an expression of their religious faith.

- (I) Protection against or response to burnout involves the pastor framing the community ministry philosophically/theologically.

Research Question 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?

- (CS) Those respondents involved in community ministry scored significantly higher on the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the Faith Maturity Scale and on the Faith Practices Scale than those respondents who said they were not involved in community ministry.
- (CS) Approximately 46% of respondents indicated they currently were involved in a community ministry activity. On the Practices of Christian Faith Scale we developed, the three faith practices directly related to community ministry—providing hospitality and care to strangers, volunteering time to help those less fortunate, and participating in activities that promote social justice in society—are reported practiced only “once in a while” or “sometimes.” Even within the sample congregations involved in this project, where community ministry is identified as an important practice of the Christian life, respondents rank the practices related to community ministry low in comparison to other practices of faith such as prayer, confession, worship, and giving financially.
- (I) Working with recipients who are different from self contributes to the learning and practicing of “tolerance,” considered a faith practice in Christian tradition.
- (CS) Volunteers score significantly higher on all dimensions and measures of religious beliefs and practices than nonvolunteers.
- (VS) Forty-seven percent of respondents indicated their faith was stronger as a result of their community ministry participation.
- (VS) Volunteers had difficulty being able to recognize or articulate—using the language of faith—the effects of community participation on their faith. This difficulty is perhaps understandable given that “only once in a while” were they provided the opportunity to discuss the connections between their community ministry and biblical and church teachings or encouraged to critically reflect on their experiences.
- (VS) Only 5.5% of respondents reported that their community ministry had an effect on their values or attitudes regarding other practices of faith—specifically, the practices of praying and witnessing.

Research Question 6: What are the various outcomes of service for the congregation?

- (VS) Volunteers reported a wide variety of positive changes in their values and attitudes as well

as in their behavior and lifestyle as a result of participation in community ministry. Almost 60% of respondents report changes in their attitudes about the persons they served or worked with in community ministry activity. For more than one-quarter of respondents (26.1%), community ministry participation resulted in an increased respect and understanding of persons in need and most often different from themselves.

- (I) Leaders identified 12 categories of community ministry results with a direct impact on the congregation. Some of these include “community esteem for the congregation,” “congregational vitality,” “more and better connections to the community,” “a shaping of the congregation’s identity,” “numerical growth,” “the burden of being considered a model for others.”

Research Question 7: 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?

- (VS) The most straightforward answer is that many congregational leaders are not providing leadership in community ministry, even though their congregants are engaged in those ministries. Only 53.2% of respondents said their congregation supported the community ministry they are involved in through prayer. Only 20% of respondents indicated they were involved in an ongoing Bible study or other spiritual guidance related to their community ministry. Although some congregations help individuals relate their community ministry activity to their faith and with other practices of faith, many do not. When leaders do not provide occasions for volunteers to reflect on their community ministry experiences and make connections to other practices of faith, they may miss opportunities to deepen their volunteers’ faith lives.
- (I) 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.
- (I) There are 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, 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.

- (I) A focus on community ministry through research can make a difference. Since the study, some participating congregations have attempted to make community ministry a more integral part of congregational life by directly relating CM to other practices of faith. For example, one congregation made community ministry a required activity in all small groups, Bible studies, and youth groups.
- (I) 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. Perhaps leaders need to give more attention to their role as spiritual guides for volunteers, along with their role of structuring sustainable ministries with teams and protections in place.
- (I) At least some leaders spoke of motives that related to their own sense of self and with less direct focus for the congregation.

"It's my call. 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. Even at that point, I was sort of acting like a caretaker because I was waiting for my real assignment. After the Lord started this church and I was pastoring about 150 kids, 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 volunteer. Even stimuli we expected to act on individuals "Holy Spirit" and "emulate national leaders," impacted the congregation. For example:

"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. 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 our folks do pretty well without being told."

- (I) 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).

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