

The Role of Faith in the Service of Christian Volunteers

Prepared for the Faith And Service Technical Education Network¹

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

This Research Brief describes the findings of the research project “Service and Faith” funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc. Christians involve themselves in service because service is an expected expression of Christian faith. In other words, faith leads to service. But are their ways that service can lead to deeper faith? If people serve because they feel called to be faithful, are there ways that congregational leaders can then help that experience to become one that leads to deeper faith? And can that faith then find expression in greater involvement in service?

From Faith to Service

Researchers have examined the role of congregations in the social services of American communities (see first section of references); they discovered that 93% of American congregations in one study offer one or more social services, and for every one church member that is served by that congregation, *four* community members who are *not* members of the congregation receive services (Cnaan, 1997). 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; they encourage and support their members as volunteers in community programs (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001; Cnaan 1997,1999, 2002).

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 (Wineburg, 2001; and Sherman 1997, 2000, 2002).

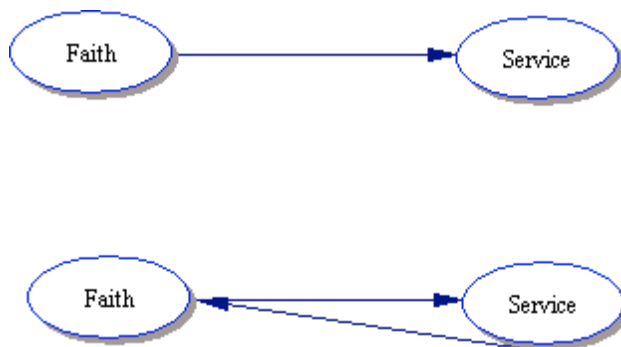
¹ This is part of a series of Research Briefs from Related Projects to be released by Baylor University School of Social Work as part of a 30-month research project funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The research reported in this brief was conducted in another research project led by Baylor University 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 Hugen (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.

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 the church. 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 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” (Forest, 1995, p. 22).

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 (Dudley, 1996, p. 10).



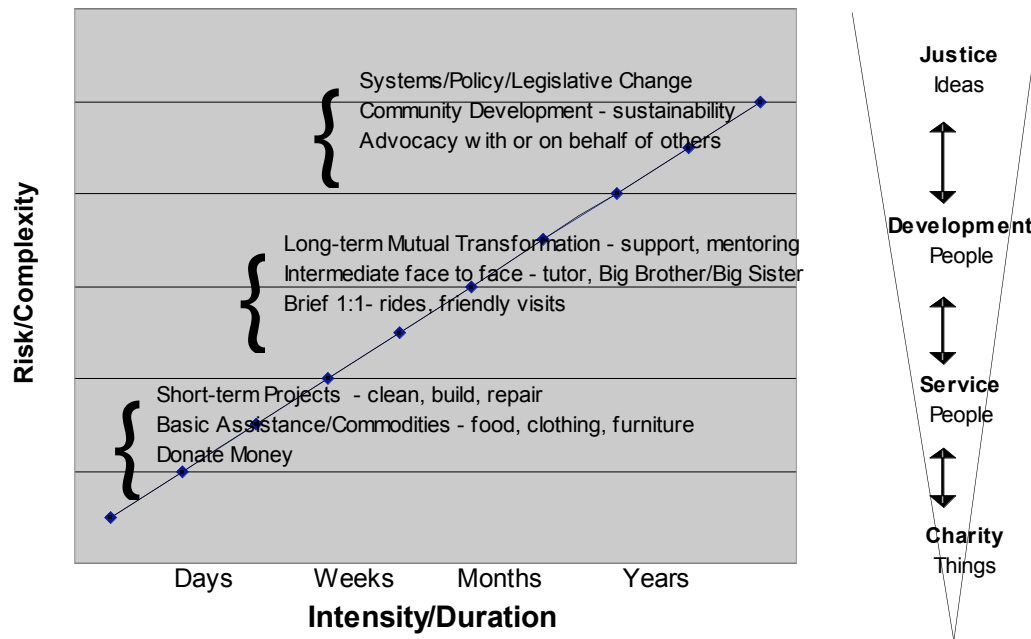
The Connections from Service to Faith

The 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) taught us the following connections of service with faith:

1. Those who were personally involved in community ministry were 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.
2. Although participating in community ministry once a week or more tended to be associated with higher scores on measures of faith, participating in worship/activities more frequently is *not* associated with higher scores on measures of faith.
3. The amount of diversity encountered in community ministry was positively associated with higher faith maturity and faith practices scores. 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.
4. Those who developed a relationship with recipients (delivered meals to the same people every week) were more involved in other practices of their faith (worship, prayer, giving financially, working for social justice, forgiving, confessing, etc.) than those who did not form relationships (e.g., handed out food vouchers or groceries).
5. Some volunteers saw verbal evangelism, or “sharing the gospel,” as the best way to meet needs. Some saw their service as a means for being able to share the gospel verbally. Others viewed their service as the gospel message in and of itself, whether or not they ever shared the gospel verbally. All of these approaches to understanding evangelism were associated with higher faith maturity and involvement in practices of faith than those who did not connect their service with “sharing the gospel.”
6. Those who had thought about the impact of service on their faith and could describe that impact scored significantly higher on all faith measures than volunteers who had not thought about the connection of what they did with what they believed.

Findings point to the significance of risk and intensity of service in the deepening and maturing of faith:

Volunteer Involvement Risk/Intensity Scale



Raymond, William L. 2002. Volunteer Involvement Risk/Intensity Scale. Faith Works Consulting, Holland, MI.

What the Volunteers Said

- ❑ Almost 60% of respondents reported changes in their attitudes about the persons they served or worked with in community ministry activity.
- ❑ 25% were even more motivated to serve, and had learned new priorities about how to use their time and money.
- ❑ Almost 47% of respondents indicated their faith was stronger as a result of their community ministry participation.
- ❑ 73% of their congregations provide financial support for the ministry and recognition for those involved.
- ❑ Only 20 % of respondents indicated that they were involved in an ongoing Bible study or other spiritual guidance related to their community ministry. These congregations were far more likely to provide publicity and funding than they were to support the ministry with organized prayer and with programs to help volunteers connect their service to their faith.
- ❑ 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.

- ❑ 60% are involved at least weekly in the programs they serve.
- ❑ The *average* length of involvement in community ministry exceeds nine years.

Implications for Working with Christian Volunteers in Congregational and Community-based Social Service Programs

In both the literature on working with Christian volunteers and this research, there are a variety of implications for service programs:

- Challenge members to get involved in community ministry as a *required*, not an elective, practice of the Christian faith. Challenge them from the pulpit, in Christian education.
- Make community ministry an integral part of the life of the church—worship, Bible study, prayer. It is more important for the faith-life of members than attending a worship service!
- Provide opportunities that move members from one-shot or short-term ministries (great places to begin) into involvement sustained over time.
- Help volunteers to recognize that this is Christian discipleship, opportunity to learn, they should not expect to be the answer to the complexity of problems they may face.
- 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. This is Christian education at its best!
- Provide opportunities in which volunteers meet and develop relationships with people over time—mentoring, working together to build the community, friendships, classes together.
- Encourage relationships with people who are *different* and may make volunteers a bit uncomfortable, at least at first.
- Help volunteers to recognize and respond to the systems that oppress and respond to systemic problems as well as to their impact in the lives of individuals—community development as well as emergency relief for persons in poverty.

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