

# **The Impact of Volunteering on Christian Faith and Congregational Life: *The Service and Faith Project***<sup>1</sup>

## *Overview of the Project*

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“When people serve, they get into a spot where I think it forces their faith to grow. The problems are too complex, the families are too broken, the thinking is too distorted. People are forced back to reliance on God to do anything, to change people.”

*--- Quote from a volunteer in the study*

*This document provides a very brief overview of the Service and Faith Project. Other documents on this website will provide the reader with more detail about the project and its findings. These documents include an extensive literature review, explanations of the project's methodology, findings from the surveys and from interviews with volunteers and their service leaders, the research instruments developed in the study, 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 **Do not quote or copy any of these documents without permission of the primary investigator.***

Social scientists have studied the extent to which congregations provide social services to their communities. There has been virtually no research, however, on how community ministry impacts a congregation and its members. Does serving others have an impact on one's faith? If so, what is that impact? Does the impact differ for different kinds of volunteers? Does the congregation itself change as a result of a community ministry staffed by some of its members?

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This study, “Service and Faith: The Impact on Christian Faith and Congregational Life of Organized Community Caring,” sought to discover how volunteer service affects faith of the congregation as a unit and of individuals, families, and teenagers within the congregation. Funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., the project was led by the Center for Family and Community Ministries of the Baylor School of Social Work with research partners from Whittier College (California), Calvin College (Michigan) and the University of South Carolina.

Religious congregations have the largest source of volunteers in America (Gerard, 1985; Wuthnow, 1995). Congregational involvement in social services was explored extensively in a 1998 survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,236 religious congregations. The National Congregations Study found that 57 percent of congregations, taken as units without regard to their size, participated in or supported social service, community development or neighborhood organizing projects within the 12 months prior to the survey. Ram Cnaan’s research raised the visibility of congregations as significant resources, or “social utilities,” to their communities. He surveyed congregations in six American communities and found that 93 percent of the 111 congregations studied provide at least one social service. On average, congregations provided 147 volunteer hours to the community per program per month (Cnaan, 1997, p. 22).

Although this research and other studies lay a good groundwork for helping congregational leaders and FBO directors understand the impact of volunteer services from congregations for the community and for service recipients, there exists a rich lode of information as yet untapped about the reverse impact, i.e., how does serving others manifest itself in the faith life of those offering the service?

### **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?

### **The Methodology**

Two survey instruments were developed for the study, the Community Ministries Congregational Survey, Part I, and the Community Ministries Congregational Survey, Part 2. All congregational attendees completed the first survey, and those who were actively involved as volunteers also completed the second survey. Part 1 included a brief version of the Faith Maturity Scale, a 24-item standardized instrument that assumes that faith develops over time, shaped by maturational processes. It also included a list of 13 faith behaviors or “practices” based on the writing of Dykstra and Bass (Bass, 1997; Bass & Dykstra, 1997; Dykstra, 1991, 1999).

The project involved 35 Protestant Christian congregations in six states representing each geographic region of the nation. The analysis of the findings is based on the 7,403 responses on the congregational survey and 946 responses on the volunteer survey. The study examined “organized community caring” programs of congregations, not informal acts of kindness or generosity.

### **Preliminary findings**

Study findings suggest that regularly volunteering in social services positively affects a person’s faith. The study showed that volunteers who had been involved in community ministry for six or more years had a significantly higher overall mean score on the Faith Practices Scale than did those who had been involved in ministry for five years or less. More specifically, they scored significantly higher in participation in the practices of evangelism, giving financial support to their church, providing hospitality to strangers, volunteering time to help those less fortunate than themselves, promoting social justice, and discussing Christian responses to contemporary issues. Specifically, there are three significant ways this happens:

### **1. A volunteer's involvement in his/her congregational activities increases.**

Those who are personally involved in various aspects of community ministry also are more involved in exercises of personal faith, including more frequent worship attendance and increased financial giving. Our research shows that volunteers, on average:

- have been members of their congregation for 13 years; and
- attend congregational worship and other activities more than once a week (61.4%);

The implications from these findings suggest two things important for congregational and faith-based organizations (FBOs) to know about faith-motivated volunteers. One is that the longer persons are involved in a congregation, the more likely it is that they will volunteer in a community ministry. In other words, individuals are not drawn to a congregation because it does community ministry; it is as people participate in the life of the congregation that they become involved in service, over time. Second, busy, involved people are more likely to volunteer. Those who work outside the home and who attend congregational worship or other activities more than once a week are also the ones who will more likely be involved in community ministry.

### **2. Volunteering tests and strengthens faith.**

Volunteers who participate in community ministry once a week score higher on measures of faith. In contrast, participating in worship/activities more frequently is not associated with higher scores on measures of faith. Also, volunteers scored significantly higher on all measures of faith maturity and practice than nonvolunteers; this holds true across age groups, including teens and older adults. Additionally, the greater the education and age of the volunteers, the higher the level of reported faith maturity.

One woman, a widow in her 50s who described her volunteer work on a home care team for a person with HIV/AIDS, said:

“I’ve stayed all night with people infected with this virus. I watched them die. I’ve been with their families through the beginning to the end with them. It’s just made my faith stronger. I truly believe that.”

### **3. Volunteers who step outside social comfort zones in their ministry engage more deeply in faith practices over time.**

Volunteers who encounter broad diversity in social, economic, racial, or physical attributes in those whom they serve, i.e., working with persons who are different from themselves, score higher on measures of faith. It also is more likely the volunteers will experience changes in their values and behavior. Volunteers said they often, almost always or always are working with care recipients who differ from them in ethnicity (60%), income (79%), education (79%), personal habits (63%), physical/emotional characteristics (44%) and religious beliefs (43%). They are less likely to work with service recipients whom they experience as being different from them in sexual orientation (17%) and political ideas (30%). Exposure to such diversity can broaden, or shake up, a volunteer's social perspective, which, in turn, can result in the volunteer

investing more deeply in practices of faith such as generosity, prayer, worship, and studying scripture. One volunteer in the study, a mother teaching ESL and GED classes with Mexican immigrants, said:

In community ministry, I have learned to see people as God sees them, to have understanding and compassion and to forgive. It's easy to judge people and their situation in life without really knowing who they are or what they've actually gone through."

A congregational leader also described how serving others who are different from self affects personal faith:

"You begin to recognize the common humanity that we have. When they suffer, you hurt too, because you can't fix it, and you can't change it. All you can do is be there with them. Part of the deepening and understanding of faith is that that in itself is a ministry."

Furthermore, most congregational volunteers in the study affirmed that their faith has been significantly affected by their participation in serving others. When asked if they were aware of any changes in their Christian faith as a result of their involvement in the community ministry, 74 percent said "yes." When asked to describe those changes, answers included:

"As a result of this, my relationship with the Lord has grown stronger, and my faith has been strengthened"

"I feel that it brings me closer to God, and I am more understanding of people who are not as fortunate as I am with material things"

"I have become more of a servant since being a part of community ministry. The Lord has taught me humility and how to love others that are different from me."

"Before ... I thought I was a pretty good Christian, and I should help the homeless, yet it was the homeless and poor who have saved me."

### **A description of volunteers**

The majority of volunteers surveyed were:

- female (59.4 %)
- educated (53% had at least a baccalaureate degree)
- married (60.9% live with a spouse)

- Anglo (67.2%)

Two other factors show the volunteers were:

- over 40 years in age (average age is 45.5)
- gainfully employed for more than 34 hours a week (34.8)

Forty-two percent of teenagers in congregations are involved in volunteering. Adolescent (ages 13-19) volunteers reported significantly higher levels of faith maturity and practice, life satisfaction and motivation to serve than teenagers who are not engaged in volunteering.

### **How congregations become involved**

We learned that congregations become involved in community ministry in a three-step process. First, someone in the congregation initiates the opportunity, i.e., none of the leaders talked about someone from outside the congregation, such as a government official or agency staff person, initiating the involvement. Second, the congregation determines its capacity (people and financial resources/facilities) for the community ministry. This may include the realization that the congregation does not now have the capacity, and then asking God to provide what is needed. And third, the congregation makes the decision to lend its support. In our study, this support was a formalized process — a governing group approved the congregation's involvement in the project. In other words, volunteers are involved in programs that are acknowledged and supported by their congregations.

Once the decision has been made to begin a community ministry, two leadership tasks emerge: one is structuring a community ministry (CM) that is sustainable, and the other is preparing and providing ongoing nurture of individual involvement. We found five basic categories necessary for support:

1. **Education:** Proving a biblical/theological rationale for community ministry. Helping people interpret their CM experiences within a Christian framework.
2. **Information:** Announcing specific needs and opportunities.
3. **Promotion:** Encouraging participation, matching and recruiting individuals for particular ministry activities.
4. **Support:** Prayer, fundraising and/or a budget line item, affirmation, accountability.
5. **Initiation:** Jump-starting involvement, taking the initiative to make or respond to contacts with other systems, planning and collaboration.

## **Summary**

For decades, social scientists have known the important role that congregation volunteers play in providing care and compassion to those in need in their communities. Much has been recorded anecdotally about these experiences, and the stories are effective in themselves as encouragement. The findings from the Service and Faith research now provide essential missing links between the two.

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