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**EFFECTIVELY ENGAGING FAITH-BASED VOLUNTEERS:  
MAXIMIZING BENEFITS FOR BOTH NONPROFITS AND  
VOLUNTEERS**

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## **EFFECTIVELY ENGAGING FAITH-BASED VOLUNTEERS: MAXIMIZING BENEFITS FOR BOTH NONPROFITS AND VOLUNTEERS**

Over 80% of charitable nonprofits use the services of volunteers, according to research by the Urban Institute and the Corporation for National and Community Service (2004, 2009). About a third of nonprofits partner with religious organizations (including 15 percent of nonprofits identified as secular), and these report both a greater scope of volunteer use and greater benefits from their volunteers. Among adult volunteers, three fourths say they attend weekly religious services, and one third say they learned about services through their congregation. About one in four youth who attend religious services also volunteer regularly. In general, people with active religious commitments are more likely to volunteer in their community through nonprofits and civic projects, regardless of whether the cause is secular or religious (Brooks 2006).

As these statistics indicate, volunteers—and in particular, religiously affiliated volunteers—play a vital role among social service agencies and community development initiatives. Yet research also indicates that nonprofits are often limited in their capacity to recruit and effectively manage volunteers. This paper focuses specifically on dynamics related to faith-based volunteers, though it draws on general principles of volunteer mobilization and management. Learning to better understand and engage religiously motivated volunteers translates into better delivery of benefits for the community as well as more fulfilling experiences for the volunteer. Because many social workers are employed by or networked with nonprofits, this is a valuable capacity arena for social workers to develop.

This paper draws on data from the Faith and Organizations Project's *Maintaining Vital Connections Between Faith Communities and their Nonprofits* study, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc (<http://www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu>). This project conducted case studies of 81 organizations to understand the ways that faith based nonprofits and their sponsoring faith communities sustain their relationships. The research looked for strategies that help faith based organizations (FBOs) maintain ties to supporting faith communities, while providing quality services. It compared strategies across religions (Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Evangelicals, Quakers, and African American Christians), and among a variety of FBOs offering social services, health and senior services, education and community development.

### **Affirming the benefits of volunteers from the faith community**

Volunteers enable nonprofits to stretch their budgets and expand the scope of their services. Many nonprofits simply could not do what they do without volunteers. Beyond these overarching practical considerations, volunteers from the faith community offer other unique benefits to nonprofits as well: they can promote agency visibility and legitimacy within religious institutions and networks, help reinforce an agency's connection with its historic religious roots, strengthen

the religious component of an organization's mission, and provide opportunities for leadership development.

First, faith-based volunteers can promote the visibility and reputation of an agency within their religious institutions or networks. Many volunteers are drawn in by word of mouth, as people invite others they know to serve with them. When volunteers are part of a congregation, a religious school, or other form of religious community, they can spread awareness and support for the agency through that network. As a staff member of a pregnancy center explains:

*A lot of times in a church ... there just happens to be somebody that just is really excited about what they see happening here. Because of that, oftentimes we know people get involved and volunteer from that church, and so that part spreads. It kind of mushrooms, and we have more people involved. They're talking about it more at the church level, and so it just naturally connects it more.*

A second benefit of faith-based volunteers is that they help to strengthen the agency's ties with sponsoring religious institutions, or reinforce its connection with its historic religious roots. For example, Caroline Center, a Catholic job-training program for inner-city women in Baltimore, draws student volunteers from Loyola College and has built a relationship with alumni associations and local Catholic high schools. A staff member remarks, "I've got a great network of School Sisters of Notre Dame who jump in when I need something done." Another ministry started by a Catholic, Our Daily Bread in Cincinnati, now has no formal religious affiliation. Yet it relies on the volunteers and food supplied by local Catholic parishes to provide a hot meal to several hundred homeless people daily.

Another success story comes from a Quaker nursing home, which enjoys a "symbiotic relationship" with a Friends school. According to a staff member, "One of the nicest things about our Friends community connectivity is ... this ability for the young people over there to interact with our residents. They come here and volunteer. Our residents go there and volunteer. And that has been a real blessing for both groups."

These examples underscore the research that nonprofits that maintain a connection with a faith community engage greater numbers of volunteers, log more volunteer hours, and report greater levels of benefit from their volunteers (Urban Institute, 2004).

Third, volunteers from the faith community can strengthen the religious component of the organization's mission. In some Christian contexts, volunteers enhance the religious mission by participating in prayer, by talking about their faith, or by modeling Christ's example to those they serve. A leader of the Jewish Community Center of Northern Virginia described the important role served by an Israeli volunteer: "Her job is to educate 'Jewishly' in the community. ... A very significant component of Judaism is having a connection to Israel. ... Her job is to bring Israel to the community here." As this illustrates, volunteers from the faith community do more than carry out tasks; they can also represent the agency's faith and religious culture.

Finally, engaging volunteers from the faith community may be seen as a way of developing leaders and strengthening the community as a whole. This is particularly true in the African

American context, where the church is often the center of community development and an incubator for preparing leaders for the work of social justice. In the Jewish community, placing young adults in volunteer positions such as board appointments creates a network of trained, experienced lay leaders who are invested in the Jewish community and poised to become the next generation of organizational leaders. This is one reason why the JCC mentioned above invested significant resources in a program designed to add 500-600 new individuals to their volunteer base. "Now they are part of Jewish community events that the Center puts on for the community—internal activities as well as helping with the *tikkun olam* piece for the community."

### **Why do people of faith volunteer at nonprofits?**

Respecting volunteers' faith perspective lays a foundation for a strong working relationship. Faith can influence the motivation of volunteers in many ways. Most prominently, volunteers serve because their faith directs them to care about others and to seek justice. In the Jewish tradition, every community member has a responsibility to support those in need through commandments to support justice and provide charity (*tzedakah*) and engage in acts of loving kindness (*chesed*). Some Christian volunteers find their mandate in Scripture or in the social gospel tradition; others follow the example of Christ, saints or other religious figures who gave their lives in service; some report a sense of personal calling, a divine directive to serve. In the African American context, participation in a church-sponsored community program may be viewed as an extension of membership in the congregation, as an arm of its mission of social uplift and empowerment.

In many traditions, helping others is part of the religious culture, a foundational way of living out and deepening one's religious beliefs. Volunteering can be an embodied declaration of faithfulness, of gratitude to God, even of worship. A minister who helped found the ecumenical community development agency GEDCO summarized this sense clearly: "I have always seen involvement in the community as an integral part of expressing one's faith." Nonprofits provide a significant outlet for this expression. A survey of GEDCO volunteers found that the main response to the question of why they gave time and effort to the nonprofit was because GEDCO allowed them to "serve people in need."

Understanding these faith-related goals can help nonprofit leaders to attract and retain volunteers from the faith community. Of course, volunteers have other motivations as well, such as the desire to gain work experience, learn new skills, or work together with friends. Affirming the role of faith alongside other motivating factors enables nonprofits to offer volunteers a more meaningful service experience.

Faith-based nonprofits can do this by providing structured opportunities for training, reflection, and dialogue on the religious aspects of volunteers' service activities and the nonprofit's mission. For example, one program of an Associated Jewish Charities includes a Jewish component in the volunteer experience, "which we do through exposing our volunteers ... to some aspect of Jewish tradition as it relates to their volunteerism"—such as the religious principle behind serving the elderly, "that it is a value to honor your father and your mother."

Not all volunteers will want to discuss their faith commitments openly. Less overt ways of weaving faith and service include symbols or rituals (a cross, iconic images, times of silent prayer or meditation) that serve to remind volunteers of the religious meaning in their work. What is important is to be intentional about encouraging faith-based volunteers to integrate their spirituality and their work, in a manner that best suits your organization's religious culture and mission.

### **Guiding volunteers in sharing faith through service**

Faith-based volunteers sometimes bring a desire to share faith with those they serve, whether by explicitly sharing the gospel or by demonstrating their beliefs in action. In some faith-based organizations, particularly in Evangelical contexts and in some African American ministries, this is welcomed. One example is the "Blessing Room" ministry of Chesapeake Christian Center. Volunteers from the church see evangelism as an explicit part of their purpose, as one leader explains:

*When people come in with problems and they need food and they need money and they need clothes, we invite them and try to help them as much as we can. ... And we tell them about the Lord, you know, about how much they are loved and not to give up—that we all go through situations, but the Lord is ever, ever faithful.*

In other volunteer contexts, explicit faith witness may be deemed inappropriate by volunteers, or it may be the subject of controversy. This was the case at Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, as noted by a leader we interviewed.

*We work with Lutheran churches, but because it is all federally funded, we are very careful in ... the churches and the volunteers that we work with to make sure that we are avoiding proselytizing. ... That has come up in the refugee resettlement program with volunteers. Sometimes we get the occasional volunteer with a mission and a very big interest in converting refugees. We have conversations about the point of the program.*

For this nonprofit, resistance to proselytizing came from both the restrictions imposed by federal funding and the culture of the organization. Other faith-based organizations may develop a multifaceted approach, in which agency staff maintain professional norms against proselytizing, while volunteers are more free to develop relationships and share their faith informally. The key is to offer guidelines for expressions of faith appropriate to your organizational context.

### **Communicating with volunteers about faith matters**

Communication is a vital factor in any volunteer program. For nonprofits that rely on volunteers from the faith community, it is particularly important to be able to communicate on matters relating to faith. This includes providing volunteers with an orientation to the agency's religious roots, values, and culture. In attracting and affirming volunteers, nonprofits should be able to articulate the value volunteers bring in relation to their faith. Nonprofits should offer channels and styles of communication that resonate with the supporting faith community.

One agency that does this well is Chesterbrook Housing. Each church in their support network (mostly Mainline Protestant) has a volunteer coordinator, who serves as the point person for communicating with volunteers. Coordinators address volunteers' questions and relay their feedback to the board. This gives volunteers a liaison within their church—someone who "speaks their language." A key staff member comments, "That is probably the best and most used channel of communication." This has strengthened Chesterbrook's relationship with the faith community, according to staff: "I would say in each one of our congregations there is an extremely high level of trust and even higher level of pride."

Conversely, where agencies do not communicate well with volunteers and supporters, this can weaken ties with the faith community. Staff at the American Friends Service Committee described struggles to create an inclusive process of communication reflective of a Quaker ethos, which would encourage Friends to give feedback and volunteer time to organizational activities. This has strained the relationship between the organization and the community of Friends, with frustration on both sides due to mismatched expectations and misunderstandings.

Faith-based nonprofits should be able to articulate specific volunteer policies that relate to faith, in order to prevent unnecessary conflict. For example:

- ❖ What if anything is expected of volunteers in terms of representing the religious character of the organization (e.g. dress, lifestyle, religious speech)?
- ❖ What is the organization's stance toward volunteers from a different religion, or no religion (e.g. would an Evangelical organization welcome a visibly Muslim volunteer)?
- ❖ If the organization includes volunteers from multiple faiths, how are volunteers expected to deal with religious diversity and relate to one another?
- ❖ If the organization sponsors explicitly religious activities, what participation is expected of volunteers (e.g. attending chapel services or prayer times)?

Nonprofits need to recognize that religion has both formal and informal dimensions. In addition to communicating formal expectations and policies relating to religion, faith-based agencies can become more aware of the ways that religion is informally embedded in their organizational culture, and how this impacts volunteers. Sometimes an organization's official documents communicate one message about its religious character, while its day-to-day practices convey a different set of expectations.

The Pregnancy Help Center, a nondenominational evangelical organization, makes its faith-related expectations explicit at every stage of the volunteer process. The information provided to prospective volunteers lays out the Christ-centered mission, vision and identity of the organization. The volunteer application asks questions like, "Are you a Christian?" "What does it mean to be a Christian?" "Can you articulate your personal faith? How would you share this with others?" In the volunteer training session observed by our researcher, the trainer stressed the goal of equipping volunteer counselors to serve clients in a nonjudgmental way while sharing the good news and truth of the Bible, and she gave examples of clients who had experienced conversion. This clear, strong communication of Christian values draws volunteers with shared beliefs, while people who are not aligned with these faith commitments can make an informed choice to volunteer elsewhere.

On the other hand, if a nonprofit welcomes volunteers of any or no faith or has the policy that volunteers should not openly discuss faith commitments with clients, communicating these expectations to new volunteers can also help prevent future misunderstandings.

### **Attracting and retaining faith-based volunteers**

In addition to general sources like newspaper notices and volunteer databases, faith-based organizations use a variety of strategies for mobilizing volunteers from the sponsoring faith community: personal invitations from a volunteer coordinator or board member (often to fellow congregants); notices in religious publications; emails or letters to members of congregations or other religious bodies; notices printed in church bulletins or announced during worship services; volunteer opportunities posted on websites or blogs followed by people in the faith community; requests through denominational channels; information sessions or "ministry fairs" held at congregations; internships from religious schools; networking with other religious institutions; and special events such as a concert or arts festival sponsored by the faith community. The director of one Quaker nonprofit personally visited Monthly Meetings in order to put out the call for volunteers and donations, or "Friend-raising and fundraising."

The religious culture of the faith community will affect the choice of connection strategies. Faith traditions with a strong centralized organizational structure often work through a centralized volunteer clearinghouse. For example, the Jewish Federation used to have several different portals—a Volunteer Office, an Information and Referral Service, and a Jewish Vocational Service; now volunteers are coordinated through one office, JCONNECT. In the Mainline Protestant, African American or Quaker faith traditions, congregations and denominational structures may play a greater role. Among Evangelicals, personal networking and religious media are often likely to be most effective. The religious culture will similarly influence the most effective form of volunteer management. Often, the same channels for sharing volunteer requests can be used for communicating volunteers' feedback and ideas to the agency.

Nonprofits should consider how to develop volunteer systems best suited to the nature of their relationship with the faith community, and how to evaluate regularly the effectiveness of this strategy. Habitat for Humanity, for example, has been retooling its approach to engage more faith-based volunteers. The Chesapeake Habitat for Humanity developed a program called Interfaith Build (Peace by Piece) in order to reach out to Jewish and Muslim partners.

Many resources are available to help nonprofits improve how they attract, supervise and retain volunteers (see recommended resources on the Faith and Organizations Project website, [www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu/pdfs/Strategies\\_additional\\_readinglist.pdf](http://www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu/pdfs/Strategies_additional_readinglist.pdf)). Added attention to religious dynamics will enhance the experience for both nonprofit and volunteer.

### **Serving volunteers**

Nonprofits founded on the religious value of caring for others should apply this principle to their volunteers. The most fundamental way nonprofits can care for their volunteers is by providing adequate training and resources so that they do not burn out. At the Mainline social service

coalition called SPAN, for example, most volunteers are elderly individuals from middle-class congregations. Unable to connect meaningfully with impoverished clients, confused by the growing complexity of the social welfare system, and overwhelmed by the escalating need, volunteers are increasingly disconnected and some have quit.

Taking the next step, organizations should see volunteers not just as resources to be used but as whole persons, with needs of their own. For example, in this difficult economy, nonprofits may be benefiting from higher unemployment rates. Nonprofits could coordinate services for their volunteers such as personal counseling for stress and financial issues, job coaching related to their volunteer position, letters of reference, referrals to other needed services, etc.

Volunteering has been associated with a range of benefits for volunteers, from strengthening work skills to expanding social networks to improving health outcomes (Wilson and Musick, 1999). Nonprofits can be intentional about helping volunteers appropriate these benefits. Youth volunteers present particularly fruitful opportunities for making service a transformative experience, as youth who volunteer are less likely to engage in destructive behavior and more likely to do well in school. Notably, youth from disadvantaged circumstances are less likely to volunteer than other youth, but more likely to be motivated to service by their faith (NCNS, 2009). Nonprofits can serve youth drawn by their faith commitments to serve others by welcoming and nurturing them on a positive path to adulthood.

Finally, serving with a nonprofit is also a way that many individuals who would not consider themselves religious get connected with faith. Many agencies rely on volunteers from the community who work alongside faith-based volunteers. At one Mainline church, the pastor estimated that about 70 percent of the current congregation had joined either because they participated or wanted to participate in the outreach programs, or they were actually served by an outreach program before becoming a member. Moreover, for people who already consider themselves religious, volunteering reinforces their faith commitment (Myers, 2008). Whatever a person's faith background, the experience of meaningful service can be spiritually enriching.

### **Summary of recommendations for organizations using faith-based volunteers**

- ❖ Understand that volunteering in a faith-based context is a two-way street: Volunteers enable the organization to carry out its mission at minimal cost; the nonprofit supplies an avenue for volunteers to express their spiritual values. Emphasizing the reciprocal nature of this relationship strengthens the ties between a nonprofit and its faith community.
- ❖ Recognize and affirm the religious motivations leading volunteers to serve with your nonprofit. Provide faith-based volunteers with opportunities to integrate their spirituality and their work, in a manner that best suits your organization's religious culture.
- ❖ Clarify policies that relate to faith, including guidelines for how volunteers can express and witness to their faith, appropriate to your context.

- ❖ Communicate your mission in a way that speaks meaningfully to the supporting faith community. Provide volunteers with an orientation to the religious history, values and culture of the organization.
- ❖ Become more aware the ways that a religious (or non-religious) character is informally embedded in your organizational culture and day-to-day practices, and how this impacts volunteers. Make sure that the formal and informal messages being sent to volunteers about matters of faith are consistent.
- ❖ Be intentional about developing volunteer systems best suited to the nature of your relationship with the faith community, and regularly assess the effectiveness of this strategy.
- ❖ Don't allow reliance on the faith motivations of volunteers to be a substitute for excellence in volunteer recruitment and management practices.
- ❖ See volunteer management not only as a matter of administration or efficacy, but as a part of the mission of the organization. Care for volunteers not just as resources to be used but as whole persons.

When nonprofit leaders understand and appreciate the ways faith motivates and guides service, they are better able to connect with volunteers as whole persons, nourishing the spiritual and social aspects of their involvement. In this way, engaging volunteers can become a mutually enriching exchange, rather than a merely utilitarian resource management strategy. Integrating the service of faith-based volunteers in a way that affirms their faith commitments and enriches their experience allows volunteers and FBOs to thrive.

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**Selected Websites:**

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- Christian Volunteering ([www.christianvolunteering.org](http://www.christianvolunteering.org))
- Church Volunteer Central ([www.volunteercentral.com](http://www.volunteercentral.com))
- Faith and Organizations Project ([www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu](http://www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu))
- FASTEN Volunteer Resources (<http://www.urbanministry.org/wiki/fasten-volunteer-resources>)
- Quaker Service (<http://www.quakerinfo.org/service/index.html>)
- Volunteering in America (<http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/>)