

# Working Solutions

For nonprofit & government members of the Points of Light

May 2003

## FAITH-BASED AND SECULAR COMMUNITY SERVICE: RECENT HISTORY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THEIR COLLABORATION

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*Welcome to Working Solutions, a bimonthly collection of information and tips on a particular issue, designed to provide Points of Light nonprofit and government member volunteer managers with practical solutions to everyday challenges.*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section One: Understanding the American Faith Landscape .....	1
Introduction .....	1
A Definition: Faith-Based Community Work .....	1
National Organizations: Deep Roots, Many Branches.....	1-2
Local Affiliates and Organizations: Faith Agencies .....	2
President George W. Bush's Faith Initiative and The Present American Faith Landscape .....	2-3
The Future .....	3
Section Two: Secular Service Agencies Working With Faith Groups: Advantages and Disadvantages .....	3
Introduction: Understanding The Dynamics Of a Faith Group.....	3-4
Choosing Common Ground.....	4
Reasons Why Partnering Can Be Difficult: The Internal/External Split .....	4
Reasons Why Partnering Can Be Difficult: Partners and Rivals .....	5
The Value-add Question and Responses To It.....	5
The Strange Paradox of Faith Isolation.....	5-6
Responding To The Internal/External Split .....	6
Reaping the Benefits of Working With Faith Groups.....	6-7
Footnotes .....	8

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# Faith-based and Secular Community Service: Recent History and Suggestions for their Collaboration

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## Section One: Understanding the American Faith Landscape

### *Introduction*

Although the nonprofit world has long worked with the social action ministries of communities of faith, a sea change between the two was underway at the turn of the millennium. The advent of the Charitable Choice Legislation, and the election of George W. Bush as president, leading to a greater convergence of religion and politics, brought the issue of faith to the forefront of the nation's consciousness. The flowering of research, conferences and water-cooler conversations has produced a greater understanding of both the potential benefits and the constraints of interactivity between secular community service agencies and faith groups. Much sustained research has been undertaken and links to some key resources may be found in this document. This paper offers a brief personal historical sketch for those coming to the scene for the first time, and some practical hints as to how to approach initiatives with faith-based organizations.

### *A Definition: Faith-based Community Work*

Faith-based community work may be defined thus: **it is community action or service conducted by organizations for whom a primary concern is not merely the good work itself, but that it is done because of, or on behalf of, or to further, a religious understanding of the world.**

This may not mean that the effort itself has any ostensible connection to faith. It may be entirely absent. There are substantial organizations in the voluntary sector today for whom it may come as a surprise that they are faith groups at all. Neither does it mean that a particular faith-filled understanding of the world is propagated. Similarly there are some very large organizations who see themselves as faith groups whose labor appears divorced from the traditional worlds of faith, such as the excellent efforts of Habitat for Humanity, or Volunteers of America, but who do certainly see themselves as faith groups. It does not even mean that individuals engaged in these organizations are themselves people of faith. They may not be.

But it **does** mean that the sponsoring organization has an understanding that the work it is undertaking is a part of its understanding of its faith mission.

### *National Organizations: Deep Roots, Many Branches*

It is important to note at the outset how complex and deeply embedded in the American landscape the faith-based social action scene is.

For example, there are a number of groups who **are** faith groups but for whom the faith-nature of their mission may well be different from their public face. For example, The Young Men's Christian Association, (YMCA), whose aim is to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind and body; or even the Salvation Army, which is widely regarded as a faith social mission, though it is in fact a church.

There are many groups for whom their background clearly has a faith base, such as the Fortune Five Hundred organization Thrivent Financial, which is a merger of Lutheran Brotherhood and the Aid Association for Lutherans, who provide financial and insurance services; or the Seventh-Day Adventist school system, who run the largest system of protestant private schools in the United States, with 1,071 schools.<sup>1</sup> (The Catholic Church has more than 8,000.) They often retain close connections to their founding faith, though in day-to-day activities, they act as secular insurance agencies, schools, or hospitals.

Lastly, it is vital to note that public funding of faith groups is neither new, nor minor. American federal and state agencies have long used private and faith-based nonprofits to achieve public ends. Take just one example: state, local, and federal funding in the year 2000 for the service organization *Catholic Charities of the USA* was \$1.81 billion: 67% of their total income. Catholic Charities has worked with the government for over a hundred years. Their major programs such as aging, housing, residential care, services for children and many others serve over several million people every year.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Local Affiliates and Organizations: Faith Agencies***

So at the national level, the picture is rich and complex. At the state and local level, the picture becomes, if anything, even more diverse. Across the country, secular agencies work day-to-day with churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious sites. There is another important section of faith-based efforts, unconnected with traditional denominations which interacts with secular organizations. These are faith-based agencies, such as Prison Fellowship, Young Life, The National Jewish Coalition for Literacy, The Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and thousands of other faith-based nonprofits. Often focused on a particular mission, these groups deliver services and other activities offered by religious sites such as liturgical services, religious counseling, spiritual retreats and so forth.

The engagement of faith institutions is complex and wide-ranging, from the smallest community playground owned by a church and used by a school, to millions of dollars in ongoing funding for large national faith charities. There are agencies, local faith and denominational affiliates, state initiatives, and national bodies all involved in the delivery of social service. Funding for such groups has been long-term and sustained, though dialogue on the utility of this action is continuing. How can this be put in context with recent developments at the federal level?

### ***President George W. Bush's Faith Initiative and the Present American Faith Landscape***

On his arrival in office, President Bush early and clearly articulated a vision that faith-based organizations would be an important partner in his administration's social engagement. He set up the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI)<sup>3</sup> by executive order, and appointed John DiIulio head, a Harvard and University of Pennsylvania academic with a background in faith-based social reforms and criminal justice. There was a wide expectation in many sections of the faith community that significant funding would soon be trickling, if not flooding, down to the faithful "armies of compassion," as the President termed them, who for so long had labored so mightily with so few resources. Secular agencies scrambled to foster connections with faith groups or highlight existing ones, in anticipation that this was where the resources might be going.

This flood of federal dollars has not yet materialized, but other important outcomes have become clear. Perhaps the most important outcome of the OFBCI under DiIulio was not what it did in terms of dollars, but what it did across the country in terms of a generating ideas, think tank seminars, TV talking heads and newspaper articles. In addition, groups both opposed to and in favor of the President's initiative made strong cases that could either damage the careful constitutional balance between "church and state" (a phrase, that in fact, omits groups other than Christian), and that their "pure" missions

would be compromised by the influx of federal dollars. The alternative argument stated that these faith-based groups, who already formed a great part of existing social services would be immeasurably strengthened and released to help solve the nation's serious social issues. In August 2001, DiIulio wrote his final report and ended his term. His report, "*Unlevel Playing Field*," highlighted problems seen for the federal funding of faith-based service programs. He argued less for the delivery of new funding for the faith community and more for a level for faith groups to apply for existing funding and the removal of barriers in federal department playing fields that inhibited the flow of resources to groups with faith connections.<sup>5</sup> DiIulio was succeeded by H. James Towey, an attorney and former counsel for Mother Theresa. Offices in five (now seven) federal departments were set up to implement DiIulio recommendations, and allow faith-based agencies to compete with secular agencies for the delivery of services, funded by federal dollars.

The exception to the level playing field outcome was the creation of the Capital Compassion Fund,<sup>6</sup> outlined in June 2002, which offered \$30 million to assist grassroots organizations. In October 2002, through The Department of Health and Human Services it gave that money to 21 "intermediary organizations" which aimed to provide technical help and assistance to the operations or expansion of grassroots faith-based programs.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Future***

The onset of other national priorities caused a lessening of the faith dialogue at the federal level, although a vibrant discussion continues within the social service sector. The reality is that the collaboration of faith-based and secular agencies is likely to grow and deepen for the next few years. It is likely to mature from the initial heady discussions of right and wrong to a more steady set of outcomes that focus on results and measurements, and include growing partnerships between faith groups at all levels. Perhaps, in particular, the stage is set for a greater understanding of how local faith organizations can add their weight to solve particular social problems, and how federal and state agencies can assist them, and yet steer a course that avoids becoming ensnared in constitutional issues. Nonprofit and government volunteer programs, with their expertise in the management of volunteers and their emphasis on solving serious social problems, are well-placed to take advantage of these national trends.

## **Section Two: Secular Service Agencies Working with Faith Groups: Advantages and Disadvantages**

### ***Introduction: Understanding the Dynamics of a Faith Group***

Though the national landscape for collaborative ventures between voluntary agencies and faith-based groups has shifted significantly in recent years, as detailed in the first section, basic dilemmas posed by such partnerships remain. The following are a few opening steps to help create working solutions gleaned from my personal experience, and to understand how these agencies and groups operate.<sup>8</sup>

There have been many misconceptions around faith/nonprofit partnerships that have caused such partnerships to fall short and halt otherwise potentially successful collaborations. Two of the most serious are:

1. That faith groups will jump at the chance to work with your nonprofit and are virtually waiting by the phone to offer you their members to help in your mentoring program, food bank, etc.;

Or that

2. Faith groups are isolated and unresponsive to the blandishments of your worthy cause, and if it does not happen to be useful to their congregation they won't help you no matter how many times you ask.

Though each of these has a nugget of truth, neither is completely correct. It may be closer to the truth to say that faith groups have similarities to many other neighborhood organizations for these reasons:

- They need to feel valued in order to offer help;
- They need to see a value-add to their own mission; and perhaps most importantly,
- They are run by people – and often one person in particular – with their own foibles, traditions and agendas.

This last is important because it brings home the importance of creating a relationship that greases the wheels of a potential partnership. If you have developed a prior relationship with a group or its faith leader, he or she will be much more willing to help you and be a part of your effort. If he or she sees how you might be able to help them later, or–better–that you already have aided them, then they are much more likely to say yes to your inquiry.

More even than in the traditional nonprofit, most individual faith groups – churches, synagogues and others operate around the direction of an individual, or a very small group, sometimes elected, who function as a “kitchen cabinet” around the minister. The minister is usually crucial to the decision-making of the organization. Though they rarely take part in the actual work themselves, they “bless” its happening and pick people to do it. The value of the people they choose from the capacity of the organization will depend on the importance they place on the initiative involved. The minister can get things done, direct others to do it, and prevent ideas from even surfacing if he or she does not want to see them appear. Perceiving this is vital to the approach. The best way to begin a relationship is not usually to write a letter to the program committee but to meet with the minister, take him or her out to lunch, or offer him or her a genial way to introduce your ideas. Just like any relationship, it will develop better not by thrusting an idea down your hearer’s throat, but by engaging in active listening, holding off dominating the conversation with your ideas and allowing him or her equal time with you to understand who you are and what you want.

### ***Choosing Common Ground***

The approach much more likely to bring success is one that positions the minister not as on another side from your program but that presents **you as on the same side of a common problem** – i.e. that you are both interested in the better health of the neighborhood, the character development of local children, etc. The meaning of this approach is that it actually takes seriously the process of true collaboration. Success will be better sustained when all parties feel that they are co-equals in the solution of a common problem, rather than if they are helping you in yours.

### ***Reasons why Partnering can be Difficult: The Internal/External Split***

A further common misconception about faith groups is that they are slam-dunk natural partners of local nonprofits with a particular cause – i.e. that they would be an easy match for a mentoring group and have similar goals. In fact, although faith groups universally seek the common good, the welfare of the young, and so on, they are NOT in fact social welfare agencies. The reality is that their agenda is a very different one – often only ostensibly similar. It is in fact a thousand missions – to provide public worship, to evangelize, to support the faithful and so on. That means that they run a child care program, it may well be for the offspring of the members and is actually quite unlikely to be there simply for the good of the neighborhood. The central reality is that in a primary way, churches, synagogues, mosques and others usually exist for the INTERNAL benefits of their membership. They usually operate on a low budget and even if they have a more external agenda, it is often severely limited. If it does exist it is more likely to be focused on the cause of outreach for their own group, and not merely a philanthropic act of kindness. This contrasts with the agenda of the nonprofit, which is usually defined around an EXTERNAL cause in need of a solution.

### ***Reasons why Partnering can be Difficult: Partners and Rivals***

Secondly, and perhaps surprisingly, it is often easier to get a group with no similarity, such as a local business, to join forces with you, than a local church, even around an issue that seems to be close to the congregation's core messages. Yet, their interest is lukewarm. Why? This may not be only because the minister or people are overwhelmed with their own concerns, though that might also be the case. It is also because in the case of say, a delicatessen or a dry cleaners, etc, you are not in any way competing with their core business. But a mentoring program or a child tutoring initiative may be very similar to their Sunday School, or Jewish Community Center children's teaching program. You may come across more as a competitor and rival for scarce resources than as a potential partner. The best way to avoid this is not to come with an already pre-formed program, but rather to approach the minister with your view of the neighborhood's needs, and the congregation as a potential partner in the creation of the solution. This takes more effort, and you will not be completely in charge, but again, it is true partnership.

Either way, you will need to make the case. Which points to a central reality about faith organizations – that they will need, just as much as any other group, to see the value-add to their congregation.

### ***The Value-add Question and Responses to it***

So what would induce a faith group such as a church to sign on? It is important to remember that most ministers seek to grow their congregations. Two quite unvarnished factors come into play: spiritual growth and numerical growth. You may or may not have interest in the former, and it is beyond the scope of this brief reflection. But it is their numerical growth that you may be able to affect. To the extent that you can show that their involvement in your program will extend their natural boundaries, will bring them into contact with other un-reached communities and bring warm bodies into the church, you will find them receptive. Can you show that your program will help that growth? Can you bring resources that will accrue as a result of their participation? Will you be able to offer congregational officers a seat at tables to which they have previously not been invited? Look for the value-add especially in terms of numbers. The reality is that many ministers have very sensitive antennae and are able to decide whether this will help with their main mission or not, and their response will be calibrated accordingly.

### ***The Strange Paradox of Faith Isolation***

Even though from the outside, faith sites look like centers of the community, there is a sense of isolation from local communities *inside* faith sites that often comes as a surprise to those who are not from a faith community. If you ask a person to name a community

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building, as likely as not it will be a school or a church. So it is a strange paradox that many ministers feel isolated from their neighborhoods. They want to connect with them but are uncertain how best to do it. This has fostered the internal/external split noted earlier. Thus your program or non-profit has a potential opportunity on which to capitalize. Can you show that you will be able to help that group become a deeper part of their community's life? Can you offer connections to other segments of their neighborhoods?

### ***Responding to the Internal/External Split***

Another often-missed factor is that of resource allocation. The number of those who volunteer across the nation through or because of their faith community is huge (see statistics on Volunteers and Faith). Yet as mentioned, because of the internal/external divide, most of them volunteer for opportunities inside the congregation. Your program might offer the best soup kitchen or meals on wheels program, but if the congregational officers are faced with the prospect of a poorly run program that keeps doing something inside the church, or see their best people walk out the door, why would they choose your program? They won't benefit. Again, the antidote is to work with the minister and, together, formulate a program that clearly benefits the congregation as a partner in your efforts.

### **Volunteers and Faith<sup>9</sup>**

- 54% of regular church attendees volunteer, while only 32% of non-attendees volunteer\*
- Frequent Church attendees (29% of all volunteers) account for 70% of volunteer hours each month\*
- Volunteers are more likely than their non-volunteering counterparts to belong to a religious organization (75.6% vs. 58%)\*\*
- Among households that contribute time or money, 58% give to both religious and secular organizations\*
- Households with people who attend religious services on a regular basis, at least once a month (54% of the respondents) give more than twice as much annually as those who are not regular attendees (\$2,151 and \$867, respectively)\*\*
- Religion giving households give 87.5% of all charitable contributions\*
- Of givers to religious congregations, over 85% also support secular organizations\*

These are just some basic hints drawn from years of experience with the engagement of faith groups in community work. But what are the benefits to working with them? With all these issues, is it worth it?

### **Reaping the Benefits of Working with Faith Groups**

The answer is yes – and here are some of the benefits of pursuing a faith community as a partner.

- First, they are likely to be the single most available group of volunteers in your locality. No other agency has the number of affiliates and outlets. There are congregations on every street corner, and with diversity to suit your interests and needs.
- Second, they are not merely there – they are often predisposed to help. Most faiths require or challenge their adherents to work for the betterment of their community. They may be busy, but if you can craft a message with the right resonance, you will find a pool of volunteers.
- Third, they commonly have a paid member of staff – the minister, if not a group of full-time people. It is hard to overestimate the value of a person with authority who is right there next to

your program. Experience in almost any area of nonprofit shows that it is the existence of a person, full-time, on a project that often makes or breaks its success. If you can mobilize – even partially – their forces on your side, you will reap a great benefit.

- Fourth, the reason congregations have been able to sustain a presence in communities of clear need when so many other organizations have left tough neighborhoods is that the payment for ministers is only partially in dollars. It is also in the more intangible blessings of the desire for a better world, or community. So they are likely to be able to stay around. Also they are there for the long haul. This is a valuable commodity for success.
- Fifth, congregations come with another set of more intangible assets that you need. Due to credit laid down over many years, congregations have usually accrued a certain invaluable cachet in communities. People want to help the church, the synagogue. If you can partner with them, some of that pixie dust naturally falls on your program. You become part of something people want to be involved in – even though they may never even go to the congregation itself.
- Sixth, the minister often carries a similar credit with the nation’s communities. In this religious nation (see U.S. Religion Statistics), the clerical office has an ability to persuade people, open doors, and curry favor that many organizations would envy. If you use it wisely, you can leverage this goodwill.
- Lastly, and for similar reasons, never underestimate the networks of a faith site. Many of the members often are pillars in the community, and the officers and clergy often have remarkable hidden networks. If you can craft a message that brings you into contact with them, your own reach will often be immeasurably strengthened.

### U. S. Religion Statistics <sup>10</sup>

#### % of Americans who:

- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| • View themselves as religious*  | 86.8% |
| • Regularly attend a worship service (compare to French 15%, U.K. 10%, Israeli 25%)*   | 57%   |
| • Say they believe in God or a higher power **   | 90%   |
| • Say they pray every day **   | 60%   |
| • Say religion is important in the lives**   | 87%   |
| • Say they have experienced God’s presence or a spiritual force that felt very close** | 83%   |
| • Say they have felt God’s presence many times**                                       | 46%   |

## Footnotes

1. *Private Schools in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1993-94*. National Center for Educational Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/ps/SEVENTH.html>
2. Catholic Charities USA, 1731 King Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314. <http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org>
3. White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/>
4. University of Pennsylvania Almanac *Tuesday, February 6, 2001 Volume 47 Number 21*. <http://www.upenn.edu/almanac/v47/n21/DiIulio.html>
5. *Unlevel Playing Field: Barriers to Participation to Faith-Based and Community Organizations in Federal Social Service Programs*. White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. August 2001. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/08/unlevelfield.html>
6. *The Compassion Capital Fund and Faith- and Community Based Initiative*. White House Office of the Press Secretary. June 05 2002. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020605-9.html>
7. *HHS Awards \$30 Million To Help Level Playing Field For Faith-Based And Community Institutions*. Department of Health and Human Services 200 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20201. News Release. October 03, 2002. <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2002pres/20021003a.html>
8. In this section when discussing faith organizations, I am primarily denoting local faith sites, such as churches, temples or mosques, and for reasons of brevity, not including faith-based nonprofits and others.
9. \*Independent Sector. *Faith and Philanthropy: The Connection Between Charitable Behavior and Giving to Religion*. Washington, DC: Independent Sector, June 2002. <http://www.independentsector.org/programs/research/faithphilanthropy.html>  
 \*\*Independent Sector. *Giving & Volunteering in the United States: Key Findings 2001*, Washington, DC: Independent Sector, 2001. <http://www.independentsector.org/programs/research/GV01main.html>
10. \*NOW with Bill Moyer. *Faith in America: Statistics*, March 1, 2002. PBS. <http://www.pbs.org/now/society/religionstats.html>  
 \*\* Religion & Ethics Newsweekly: *Exploring Religious America*, Spring 2002. [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/archive/religious\\_archive1.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/archive/religious_archive1.html)

## Working Solutions

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Notes