

Paper Number: PA051025

Paper Title: Outcomes of service in the lives of faith-motivated volunteers: Why community leaders need to care

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Summary of Research

Explores the consequences of involvement in five types of community ministry for congregational volunteers, both individuals and families. Reports findings from a survey of 7403 church members from 32 Christian congregations, an additional survey of 946 active volunteers, as well as in-depth interviews with 29 congregational leaders, 25 individual volunteers, and 16 families volunteering in their communities. Concludes with implications for congregational leaders and social service professionals who lead volunteers.

Description

The problem to be addressed:

Much of the current public emphasis on faith-based services sees faith as an independent variable. That is, volunteers and faith communities bring "faith" as an element in services that have some impact on the effectiveness of services rendered (e.g., Trulear, 2000). The literature from within the church, however, suggests that faith and service are in a dynamic, transactional relationship with one another: faith is also a dependent variable. Not only does faith motivate the service of the faithful, but that service in turn has the potential for deepening and transforming faith. That potential can in turn lead to a greater commitment to service, compassion for those who suffer in unjust social systems, and the potential for more radical engagement in the community. In order for that potential to be realized, however, those who work with volunteers—whether leaders in the congregations or social workers in social service agencies—need to focus not only on meeting the needs of the recipients of service in the community, but also on understanding the outcomes of service for volunteers themselves.

State of knowledge in the field:

Congregational life appears to provide a consistent positive influence on volunteering; church attendance is the best general predictor of involvement in volunteer service (Gerard, 1985; Greeley, 1997; Hoge, Zech, McNamara, & Donahue, 1996; L. D. Nelson & Dynes, 1976; Park & Smith, 2000; Smith, 2004; Wuthnow, 1995). Those who attend more than once per week spend far more hours each month (5-9 hours) volunteering than those who attend only once a week or less (0-5 hours) (Hoge et al., 1996). Other factors that positively predict volunteering, when contrasted with non-volunteers, include: more education (Chambre, 1984); higher socioeconomic status (Gronbjerg & Never, 2002; Park & Smith, 2000); less than full time work status (although retirement has no impact) (Gronbjerg & Never, 2002; Park & Smith, 2000); being married rather than single (Uslaner, 2002); previous volunteering experience (e.g., people who have not volunteered before retirement do not on their own tend to begin volunteering once they retire) (Caro & Bass, 1997; Chambre, 1987; Dye, Goodman, Roth, Bley, & Jensen, 1973); a religious identity passed on from parents (Park & Smith, 2000); altruistic rather than self-promoting motivations for volunteering (Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996; Wuthnow, 1991); more reflective in disposition, less concerned with material aspects of life, and with a greater need for contemplation and prayer (Gerard, 1985); better health and a greater preference for active pursuits rather than spending long periods watching television (Gerard, 1985); forgiving of others (Wuthnow, 2000); and—simply—someone asked the potential volunteer to become a volunteer (Bowman, 2004; Park & Smith, 2000; Roehlkepartain, Naftali, & Musegades, 2000)

Those factors that appear to sustain volunteer involvement have been studied far less. A few research studies suggest that they include: being connected with others who are volunteering (Cnann, Boddie, Handy, Yancey, & Schneider, 2002; M. C. Nelson, 1999); receiving multiple forms of social support for the volunteer activity (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002); and the opportunity to develop genuine relationships with service recipients (Lawrence, 2000). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, volunteers need a language to talk about their motivations for serving. Wuthnow (1991) interviewed dozens of adults involved in voluntary service and concluded it is just as important to have a language to interpret one's motives as it is to have the time and resources to actually volunteer.

This study explores the various characteristics of the volunteer experience itself, and the impact of these characteristics on the lives of volunteers.

The Study

In order to understand the variables that contribute to impact on the lives of volunteers, this project involved a purposive sample of 35 congregations located in four regions of the United States—Michigan (n=8), South Carolina (n=8), Texas and Louisiana (n=13), and Southern California (n=6). As a result, 7403 church members completed a congregational survey. A second survey was administered to a subgroup of 946 active volunteers. In addition, the research team conducted in-depth interviews with 29 congregational leaders, 25 individual volunteers, and 16 families volunteering in their communities.

Volunteers in these congregations are involved in quite an array of community service programs, with less than half taking place on the campus of their own church facility. These are not simply occasional one-shot service projects; 60% are involved at least weekly in the programs they serve. The results of volunteer can be characterized as increased personal knowledge (of self, of faith, of the service context), changed attitudes and values, changed faith and religious beliefs, and changed behaviors of volunteers and volunteer families. In addition, volunteers and congregational leaders described the impact of community service on internal congregational dynamics and congregational relationships with the larger community.

Contribution to the Field

The study provides congregational and community service leaders with a typology of the characteristics of various volunteer experiences and their varying impact on the volunteers and their congregation. It suggests ways volunteer opportunities can be shaped to more effectively increase commitment to service, compassion for those who suffer in unjust social systems, and the potential for more radical engagement in the community.

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