

OUR HIDDEN SAFETY NET

BY RAM CNAAN

SOCIAL & COMMUNITY WORK BY URBAN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS



FROM COLONIAL TIMES, religious congregations and religious organizations in the United States have been providing not only for the spiritual needs of their congregants and communities, but for their social welfare as well. Indeed, until the close of the 19th century, religious groups were virtually the nation's sole provider of social services. Social work, the profession now dedicated to caring for the human and social needs of society's most disadvantaged members, is rooted in religious theology and practice but is now distanced from faith-based social services.

The split between faith-based social services and social work began at the turn of the 20th century. In 1897 Reverend Samuel H. Gurteen organized the Buffalo Charity Organization Society, modeled on similar groups in London and Glasgow whose new philosophy was that the needs of the poor should be

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met not only by members of religious congregations but also by the wealthy of the community at large. Under the influence of these societies, social services gradually traded their community-religious base for one that was citywide, temporal, and professional. The delivery of social services became less arbitrary and more systematic, and social work became increasingly secular, in a process that reached its culmination in 1935 with the enactment of the Social Security Act.

But despite the secular evolution of

the welfare state, religious congregations have quietly continued to provide social services over the years. And as the nation's social needs have become more urgent over the past few decades, religious congregations have responded. They may well be providing more social services than ever before. I use the phrase "may well be" advisedly. Little hard data exist on the extent of social service provision by congregations now or in earlier times.

In this article I report the findings of my 1997 study, supported by Partners



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in Mobile (the low number of social programs in Mobile may be attributable to the more rural character of the congregations studied). The social services varied widely, an indication that congregations were targeting the unique needs of their communities. Programs offered most frequently included food pantries (almost 60 percent of the congregations), music performances (56 percent), clothing closets (52 percent), holiday celebrations (52 percent), community bazaars and fairs (50 percent), choral groups (50 percent), international relief (50 percent), recreational programs for teens (45 percent), alliances with neighborhood associations (44 percent), visits to patients in hospitals (44 percent), visits to the sick (43 percent), soup kitchens (41 percent), and recreational programs for children (41 percent).

Each of the six cities in the study tended to have a distinct profile. Chicago and Indianapolis congregations, for example, were especially involved in providing permanent housing for needy people; community economic development; and programs for families, for children and youth, for homeless and poor people, and for other people in need. Mobile congregations provided many programs for children and youth, services for homeless and poor people, and programs for permanent housing, but they were less involved in assisting refugees, immigrants, or prisoners. New York congregations were quite distinct, specializing in arts and culture and in community organizing, such as boycotts and protests. They offered few programs for children and few for refugees, immigrants, or prisoners. Philadelphia congregations offered more programs for seniors, children, and youth, as well as educational opportunities for adults. They were less involved in services for the homeless and poor people or for refugees, immigrants, or prisoners. San Francisco congregations offered many programs for homeless and poor people, services for poor immigrants and refugees, health programs, and community security services. They offered fewer programs for families, seniors, or children.

for Sacred Places, of 113 historic churches—all built before 1940 and still used as places of worship—in six American cities. Its purpose is to document the extent to which religious congregations are involved in community social service activity.

What Services?

My study consisted of extensive interviews by a research team with clergy, lay leaders, and social service providers in mostly urban churches in Chicago, Indianapolis, Mobile, New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. Congregation size ranged widely—from a low of 20 to a high of 4,800—with an average membership of 624. Most congregations consisted mostly of one ethnic group. Of the 113 congregations, 90 reported that three-quarters or more of their members belonged to one ethnic group, usually either African American or Caucasian. The congregations ranged from politically and theologically conservative (the former tended to cluster in Indianapolis

and Mobile, the latter in Indianapolis, Mobile, and Philadelphia) to politically and theologically liberal (the former in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, the latter in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York). Though some denominations were over-represented in particular cities, overall the sampling of denominational distribution was reasonably well balanced: 9 Presbyterian, 18 Baptist, 22 Episcopal, 11 Methodist, 18 Catholic, 10 Lutheran, and 25 others, including Jewish synagogues, independent churches, Pentecostal churches, and Friends Societies.

The 113 congregations in the sample reported providing a total of 449 social programs. One hundred and two (91 percent) provided at least one social service, and most offered more. Ninety-three percent of congregations in New York and 81 percent of those in Chicago reported offering five or more programs, as did 56 percent in Indianapolis, 50 percent in San Francisco, 44 percent in Philadelphia, and 24 percent

Who Participates?

Who benefits from the social services these religious congregations provide? Congregation members take part in the programs' services, of course, but they are far outnumbered by nonmembers. For the total sample, the mean number of participants per program provided by or housed in a local religious congregation was 207. The mean number of congregation members was 40—a ratio of nonmembers to members of 4.2 to 1. Broken down by city, the ratio of nonmembers to members was 3.2 to 1 in Chicago; 7.1 to 1 in Indianapolis; 1.9 to 1 in Mobile; 2.9 to 1 in New York; 5.2 to 1 in Philadelphia; and 6.3 to 1 in San Francisco. Clearly, the many social and community programs offered by local religious congregations are designed to benefit the community at large.

Although some services, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Boy Scouts, were provided in the congregation's

quarters entirely by nonmembers, members often assisted community volunteers. For the total sample, members slightly outnumbered nonmembers in providing services—by a ratio of 1.1 to 1. In Chicago and Indianapolis, nonmembers providing services slightly outnumbered members, indicating that the congregations were more likely to be involved in joint efforts with the community rather than in direct service to their community. In New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, by contrast, members providing services outnumbered nonmembers by roughly 2 to 1; the ratio was almost 3 to 1 in Mobile.

The Financial Commitment

How much did their social programs cost the congregations? Of 240 reported programs involving monetary expenditures by the congregations, 7 were unusually costly (more than \$5,000 a month). Those we omitted from our

calculations so as not to bias our findings upward. Of 233 remaining programs with monetary costs, the mean monthly cost was \$691. Monthly costs were highest in New York (\$1,006), lowest in Indianapolis (\$558). In addition to direct monetary support, congregations also provided space, particularly parish and fellowship halls and kitchens, classrooms, basements, and sanctuaries. The average market value of the space provided for each program was \$562 per month.

The value of church volunteers' time was also considerable. Of the 449 programs in the entire sample, 338 used volunteers. The monthly number of volunteer hours for the whole sample of congregations was 49,892, which averages out to 148 hours per program per month. Indianapolis reported the highest mean, 220 hours; Philadelphia reported the lowest, 79 hours. In 1991 the Independent Sector, a national orga-



nization studying volunteer activity nationwide, assessed the value of a volunteer hour at \$11.58. Using that figure results in an estimated monthly value for the whole sample of \$577,751. Clergy and staff also invest considerable time in community service programs. For the sample as a whole, clergy were involved in 236 of the 449 programs and staff in 216 programs. Clergy averaged 19 hours of work per program per month; staff averaged 67 hours.

Congregations also provided valuable in-kind support and utilities. In-kind support such as the use of phones, printing, photocopying, and postage, was reported for 191 of the 449 programs at a mean cost of \$71 per month. The cost of utilities—heating the building, cleaning it, wear-and-tear—amounted to a mean of \$218 a month for the 182 programs reporting such costs.

When we added the total costs reported for the programs and divided the result by the total number of programs, including nonreporting programs, we found that the average monetary value of a program was \$3,177 a month—or \$38,124 a year. Broken down by city, the lowest average monthly cost per program was in Philadelphia (\$2,025); the highest cost was in Indianapolis (\$4,157).

For the entire sample, the mean share of the annual operating budget allocated to social ministry was 17.4 percent. The highest share was 21.2 percent (in Philadelphia); the lowest was 13.1 percent (in Mobile).

Any money income or in-kind services received by the congregations in return for their support was minimal. Few programs generated any income for the congregations. Of the 54 that did, the mean was \$771 per program per month, or \$93 averaged out over the entire sample. Another 50 programs reported in-kind support valued at a mean of \$903 per reporting program, or \$101 per program for the whole sample.

The net congregational contribution to society (the total monthly per program contribution—\$3,177—less the monthly per program income—\$194) was \$2,984 per program per month, or

\$35,803 per program per year. On average, the subsidy congregations gave to their community programs was valued at more than \$140,000 a year. Note, however, that this mean is the value of the program, not the actual fiscal cost accrued by the studied congregations. In other words, we measured the value of services if they were given as a volunteer labor or as part of the maintenance of the congregation, as an equivalent secular service will require such services to be paid for with real money.

How Congregations Get Involved

The people most influential in initiating social services in our sample were the clergy and individual members or groups in the congregations. Congregational committees and staff members also initiated services. Few programs were organized in response to requests from people or groups outside the congregation. Together, other congregations, diocese, judicatory, neighborhood coalitions, human service organizations, and government agencies were responsible for initiating just over 15 percent of all reported social programs.

Many of the programs—165 of the total of 449—were begun in response to a change in the community. Of the others, 63 grew out of local cutbacks in public spending, 61 out of cuts in state spending, and 67 out of cuts in federal spending. New York reported the greatest response to cuts in public spending. Such cuts spurred few social programs in Indianapolis and Mobile. There, congregations reported that community service was a way to witness their faith. In fact, congregations did not see government cutbacks as the reason for their involvement. Rather they told us that they reacted to observed needs in the community.

A Beacon in the Night

In an era in which mutual aid societies are practically vanishing, religious congregations continue to carry out social programs in most American communities. Their perseverance in an era of downsizing and declining corporate support is a clear message to their

neighbors and society at large of resolution and faith. A 1995 study by S. Verba, K.L. Scholzman, and H.E. Brady found local religious congregations to be the most important source of civic competence in contemporary America, especially for people of low income. Our findings support the importance of local religious congregations in enhancing local quality of life and contributing to the formation of civil society.

Today, as responsibility for social programs is being devolved from the federal government to state and local authorities, congregations and religiously affiliated entities—the least studied and least understood actors in contemporary public life—are beginning to gain notice in public discourse.

Not that the issue is simple. Some of the religious groups that provide social services adhere to values that are not popular and that can be offensive to some groups. Some Americans are uncomfortable with the notion that religious congregations consider providing social services to be ministry and yet are a key element of the local welfare system, actively supporting the neediest members of our society.

Congregations are highly involved in social service in their communities and beyond. Their voluntary effort serves as a vital backbone for civic society in America. That congregations throughout the nation come to the help of those in need is a uniquely American social institution, one that is insufficiently acknowledged publicly, let alone celebrated by the members of the congregations and their clergy.

Yet no matter how much congregations exert themselves, they cannot even begin to fill the gaps created by the devolution of federal responsibility for social welfare to states and localities. The impressive network of services provided by congregations is at best important locally, a complement to state services. And as important as providing social and community services is to religious congregations, it is nevertheless a secondary goal—and one dependent on the congregation's ability to master sufficient resources and human capital to reach it. ■