

# SACRED PLACES, CIVIC PURPOSES

## *Some Thoughts on What the Congregations Do*

In November and December 1997, Brookings—in cooperation with Partners for Sacred Places and with help from the Pew Charitable Trusts—organized two meetings on the role of churches, synagogues, and mosques in fighting poverty and alleviating social distress. The meetings were animated by the conviction that while government had an essential role to play in the tasks of fighting crime, family breakup, drug addiction, and joblessness, it would not succeed on its own. The work of social reconstruction is civic and community work in which the churches have always been deeply implicated.

Participants were urged to address four questions. Which forms of social service and social action are the congregations particularly well placed to perform, and which tasks might they perform better than government? What could government do to help—and also not to hinder—these efforts, and what forms of government participation might be dangerous, either to the religiously based social action or to religious freedom, or both? What responsibilities did the wealthier congregations have to their poorer brother and sister congregations? And how did cuts in government assistance to the poor affect the work of religious charities?

What follows are excerpts from the discussions.

I am well aware of the good work that churches are doing to serve the poor in all communities. The difficulty I have is not with the good work, but with the jump that is made between churches out there doing good work and the need to use taxpayer money to do it.

Julie Siegel  
Americans United for Separation of  
Church and State

One of the things that is vitally important in every facet of this American experiment is what I would call “community organizing,” bringing people together. Not doing things for people, but calling forth what’s inside of them. Churches do that very well. It’s not a question of religion. It’s a question of inspiration and trust in the human being. Churches are the base operators of great community organizing, where people can be brought together to do for themselves. That’s the type of effort that should be supported. And we have to find a way in the nation whereby to separate what I would call pure religion and just the honest to God work of helping people—and support one and not the other.

Father Michael Doyle  
Sacred Heart Church, Camden, N.J.

It’s really not about religion. It’s about what kinds of mechanisms can resurrect hope and create the material and spiritual basis for children surviving. If faith-based institutions can reduce crime, contribute to the reestablishment of the rule of law, reintroduce some minimal, normative presuppositions about order, value, and meaning for a generation of young children who may otherwise drown in their own blood, the question becomes an ethical one: is the state morally obligated to facilitate the reduction of needless suffering in the lives of children?

Eugene Rivers  
Azusa Christian Community, Boston

I’ve been a pastor on the South Side of Chicago for about 12 years now. I want to remind everyone how much regulation of our private work in churches already exists. My church of 270 people has a budget of \$350,000. Because we work with children, because we work with the elderly, because we work with the sick and the poor, our private building is now a public building. We are inspected. We have to meet all kinds of new regulations every year. And don’t think that the government is prepared to help us actually understand what these regulations are and accomplish them without having to close down.

Rev. Susan Johnson  
Chicago, Illinois

**W**hen most people think of the homeless, they think of 55-year-old white alcoholics. The truth is that 80 percent of the homeless are under 45 years of age. The majority are minorities. And 70 percent live in the community on a regular basis. They're not hitchhiking into our towns. They're falling out of our inner cities and our housing projects and they're in and out of homelessness on a consistent basis.

Steve Berger  
Int'l. Union of Gospel Missions

**T**he reason we're having this conversation is that a lot of old solutions have proven to be not all that helpful. We're in a time when an awful lot is being redefined. The role of government at all levels is being redefined, but so is the role of religion. The entire American experiment is going through a very important testing time, when we must find new ways to think about the relationship of religion and social life.

Jim Wind  
Alban Institute

**I**t seems really different when you think about a church-based group running a youth development program than the church being the place where everybody has to apply for food stamps. I think we should think about it in a very different context.

Sharon Parrott  
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

**A** typical large American corporation has a policy that says, "If employees give money up to a certain amount to charitable organizations, we, the firm, will match that amount." If employees give money to Harvard or Chicago or some other university, or if they give the money to the symphony orchestra or the Philharmonic, it will be matched up to a certain dollar. But none of these organizations will match money going to churches. Now I don't believe there is a legal reason for not doing this. I believe corporations regard church-based giving the way many Americans regard the relationship between church and state. Warily. So if you want to change the giving pattern, one place to start is to ask large corporations to modify the way they match contributions so that faith-based organizations are on the list.

James Q. Wilson  
UCLA

**W**e have 260 Gospel Rescue Missions that every day feed more than 100,000 meals and sleep more than 30,000 men, women, and kids. Last year we collected \$350 million, practically none of it from the government. One thing that needs to be mentioned is government interference in our work. We have missions today that can't expand because the government says there will be no more social service agencies or no more beds in a certain area. The Newark mission is in court right now—because a Muslim who voluntarily entered a nongovernment-paid-for program, entered it knowing it was a Christian-based program that believed in conversion, sued the Good Will Home in Newark. That mission is in court and the opponents they're fighting are government-funded legal services. They have spent more than \$50,000 as of today to defend their right to preach the Gospel in their rehabilitation program. And in Richmond, California, the mission has just been cut off from food stamps because it has religion as part of its program.

Steve Berger  
Int'l. Union of Gospel Missions

**N**o one on this panel is talking seriously about turning the inner cities over to the churches or their congregations. Just to think about that purely in the social services vein would be preposterous. Take public cash assistance and food stamps—you're talking about more than \$80 billion a year. To replace that entirely the 250,000 plus congregations in this country would each have to increase their giving by \$300,000 a year.

John DiIulio, Jr.  
Princeton University