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# *Putting Faith in Service*

| BY STEVEN WALDMAN

**D**o the world's five major religions agree on anything? They don't agree on the nature of God. They don't agree on the path to salvation. They don't share the same views about good and evil. When you go down a list of theological tenets, it's hard to find a single idea that Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism embrace.

But there *are* two things—perhaps the only two things—that all of these faiths ostensibly endorse: charity and service.

*“Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.”—Jesus (Matthew 5:42)*

*“There is a key for everything, and the key to Paradise is love for the poor.”*  
—The Prophet Muhammad,  
Hadith reported by Ibn Umar

*“Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”*  
—Psalms 82:3-4

*“He is no friend who does not give to a friend, to a comrade who comes imploring for food; let him leave such a man—his is not a home—and rather seek a stranger who brings him comfort.”*

—Rig Veda 10.117.1-6 (Hindu)

*“If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of selfishness overcome their minds.”*

—The Buddha, *Itivuttaka Sutra*

Caring for the lowly is central to virtually all faiths, and therein lies a huge opportunity for supporters of national service. Religion can fuel service, and service can fuel religion.

I’m not proposing anything entirely new. In fact, under the Bush administration, faith-based programs have become a bigger part of AmeriCorps, and the corps has become a bigger part of President Bush’s faith-based initiative. In all, 13.9 percent of the competitive grants awarded by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) in 2003 went to faith-based programs.

What I am proposing new is that national service proponents challenge the faith community to dramatically increase its involvement in the drive to enlist people in service. Our goal should be to recruit some 100,000 houses of worship to contribute to a service program in some way.

Religious groups often have a surplus of volunteers but a paucity of managers to coordinate them. Under Corporation for National Service Chief Executive Harris Wofford in the mid-1990s, AmeriCorps began encouraging its members not only to do service themselves but to recruit and lead others to serve. For instance, the Christian housing ministry Habitat for Humanity has reported that its 450 AmeriCorps members recruited, trained, or supervised more than 150,000 community volunteers to build Habitat homes.

It’s an instructive example. Habitat’s founder, Millard Fuller, had been skeptical about taking on AmeriCorps members, fearing entanglement with a big government bureaucracy. He was actually overruled by the group’s board on this point. Fuller (who was recently dis-

missed from his post for unrelated reasons), eventually became one of the corps’ biggest advocates. “We at Habitat for Humanity feel privileged and honored to have the AmeriCorps people with us, and we want more of them as time goes on,” he said.

A federal appeals court recently ruled that this type of cooperation meets constitutional muster because AmeriCorps funds individual volunteers and not the religious programs they work with. After all, federal college financial aid programs give education vouchers to college students who use the money to attend divinity school. As long as corps members don’t lead prayers or the like when they’re on the government’s dime, it’s fine for them to participate in a home-building program—even one founded and operated by people of faith.

It shouldn’t be hard for AmeriCorps to stay within the bounds of the First Amendment’s establishment clause. Much religious missionary work today is geared toward modeling Christian or Jewish ethics or the values of a particular faith through action, rather than conversion. The Jesuit Volunteer Corps, for instance, attempts to witness the life of Christ by helping the poor. It does little or no proselytizing.

Here’s another example: The Rev. Wilson Goode, a former mayor of Philadelphia, created a program called Amachi to help fathers in prison. He was able to expand into 15 other cities with help from AmeriCorps, VISTA, and Senior Corps. In all, volunteers from these and other CNCS programs served more than 12,000 children of prisoners and 30,000 ex-offenders.

Working with religious groups could also help national service scale up—and not just because faith-based aid is fashionable now. When I worked at AmeriCorps in the mid-1990s, we were on a drive to reduce its per-person costs. The main components were the modest annual living allowance for full-time service members (now about \$9,300), the \$4,725 scholarship for those who complete service, and overhead costs. The living stipend represented about half the total cost, which makes sense, because full-time service pretty much precludes idealistic youth from working to earn money.

Now imagine if thousands of religious groups agreed to perform one simple act: Provide free room and board for a national service volunteer. The churches wouldn't have to pay the volunteer a stipend or divert funds from their Sunday schools. All they'd have to do is get a family to agree to take in a volunteer as a boarder for a few months. That simple act by churches would let AmeriCorps help tens of thousands more people. Every federal dollar now used to fund 10 corps members could be stretched to fund 15.

Though it's harder to prove, I suspect that AmeriCorps would attract more motivated volunteers if it worked with more religious congregations. Some corps programs are still service/job training hybrids that attract some people who are in it primarily for the cash. Faith-driven volunteers would most likely have a stronger sense of mission.

Strengthening AmeriCorps' bonds with the faith community also would have practical political benefits (well beyond the obvious one that Republican politicians seem to like giving money to religious groups). National service programs have always tried to enlist young Americans from a broad range of backgrounds. But the truth is that national service attracts more liberals than conservatives. AmeriCorps advocates have tried to solve that problem over the years by collaborating with the military or by organizing service corps on quasi-military models, such as the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC). I love those programs; they have an esprit de corps that forges tremendous bonds among volunteers from very different backgrounds—the old World War II class-mixing fantasy come true.

Dramatically increasing religion's role in AmeriCorps could have a similar effect. Religious institutions draw people from a much wider range of political and socioeconomic backgrounds than, say, the VISTA program. Likewise, faith-based corps programs can draw the sons and daughters of red states together with the sons and daughters of blue states.

Imagine the political constituency that would emerge when AmeriCorps members included not only of the daughters of college professors but also the sons of ministers. And imagine how a federal

appropriator might behave differently if a church in his or her district gushed about how its AmeriCorps volunteer helped it double the capacity of its homeless shelter.

There's far more reason to take this path than building support for a favorite cause. When other national service groupies and I began pushing the idea in the late 1980s, we believed it could help bridge America's racial and class divides. I still believe that and have seen City Year, NCCC, and other AmeriCorps programs do it time and again. They succeed because when groups of people work closely together, they begin looking beyond stereotypes and sizing up each other as individuals: Can I count on him? Does he try hard? Is he honest? Will he cover my back? These are factors that cut across racial and class lines.

Now, as it enters its second decade, AmeriCorps can similarly help ease the nation's religious divisions, especially those stemming from the war on terrorism. The same social dynamic that makes service a singularly effective way to build bridges across racial divides applies equally to fostering religious understanding. A Christian and a Muslim caring for a homeless man together will come to see the humanity in each other and perhaps come to understand how the other person's faith led to his or her compassion.

Working with AmeriCorps would be good for religion in another sense. Many people, especially the young, are alienated from organized religion because they believe it is wrapped up in dogma, theology, and hypocrisy. I happen to be fond of dogma and theology, but hypocrisy is a big problem.

And when it comes to helping the poor, churchgoers often don't practice what they preach. Sixty percent of the \$190 billion that Americans give to charity each year goes to religious institutions—more than to youth development, human services, education, health, and foreign crises combined. Precious little finds its way to the poor. According to a survey by the Christian research firm Empty Tomb Inc., in 1997 the average Protestant congregant gave his or her church \$497. Church upkeep swallowed \$418 of that amount, and only \$79 went to "benevolences." Don't get me wrong. It's fine to

help your local congregation or church. The choir director needs to be paid, and the church boiler needs to be fixed. But that shouldn't be confused with helping the poor or solving social problems.

The record isn't much better when you look at the breakdown of volunteering hours in America. Only 7 percent to 15 percent of volunteering done through churches helps the larger community, according to Lester Salamon, director of the Institute for Policy Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

Churches need to be challenged, and a national service effort that included them as major partners would be a huge step forward. If religious groups became far more associated with direct service in their communities and around the world, they would capture the imagination and hearts—and eventually the souls—of millions more young people. After all, it wasn't just Jesus' preaching that attracted converts but his willingness to heal the lepers and feed the poor. Imagine what would happen if the nation's religious organizations placed a greater emphasis on repairing the world, to use the Jewish phrase, than on arguing.