

Religion is a major influence in the American philanthropy sector. Faith-based schools, congregations, and youth-serving groups play an important role in transmitting philanthropic traditions to children and youth.

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Speaking to a higher authority: Teaching philanthropy in religious settings

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WHERE DO CHILDREN learn to care for others? Traditionally, we think of home and school as important socializing partners. But home is not what it used to be. Today's child is likely to grow up under the loose guidance of an overworked, financially strapped single parent. Many schools, struggling just to provide a safe educational environment, are in no position to fill the gaps in a child's philanthropic education.

The limitations of most family settings and school environments are especially difficult for today's youth, who are under an unprecedented amount of pressure to take on almost antisocial behavior.

Families need help in this area, and faith-based organizations are strategically positioned to fill the gap. For example, religious youth programs can offer a safe harbor from the proliferation of negative influences. Shared religious values can be integrated into parochial

school curricula or congregation youth programming. Learning opportunities away from home, including summer camp, mission trips, and religious outreach programs, can engage youth to volunteer and gain leadership skills. This chapter focuses on religious philanthropy and the way faith-based organizations can pass on this behavior to youth.

Religious philanthropy

What distinguishes faith-based giving from other kinds? Religious philanthropy typically is an act of “voluntary” giving or service on behalf of a higher divine authority. Like all discretionary behavior, religious philanthropic acts can be motivated by a mix of internal and situational variables. However, theological beliefs often play a distinct role.

Some common religious beliefs that distinguish religious philanthropy from other types of giving include

- *Viewing God as the ultimate authority.* As the ultimate owner, God controls or at least has some say in how much we receive. Because all bounty derives from God, this sense of divine accountability can exert a powerful force on religious giving.

- *Viewing oneself as a steward.* Seeing God as the ultimate owner of the world places humans in the role of stewards or servants. With stewardship comes the responsibility to use material resources wisely and in a beneficial manner.

- *Giving in a discretionary rather than obligatory way.* A strong religious perspective views a portion of everyone's wealth as belonging to God. This raises a philanthropic distinction between obligatory giving, or tithing, and discretionary contributions such as acts of kindness or volunteerism.

- *Giving as a way to thank God.* Because God is the source of all blessings, it is important to be thankful. This may be done by praising God through prayer by traditional philanthropy and by shar-

ing faith with others through religious outreach, such as ministry or mission work.

- *Giving a fair share.* Intent and manner of giving are important. Rambam, a twelfth-century Jewish scholar, identifies eight levels of giving (Feuer, 2000). The New Testament parable titled “Widow’s Mite” (Luke 21:1–4) illustrates that giving one’s fair share, no matter how small, is more important than a larger contribution from someone who can afford even more. The Koran praises those who “do a lot, but say little” (McChesney, 1995).

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions of giving

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share many common views on responsibility of wealth (Bentley, Weber, and Hall-Russell, 1999; Smurl, 1991). For example, all three religions distinguish between giving that is obligated (tithing, *zakat*) and charity that is encouraged but only voluntary (good works, *sadaquah*) (Kahf, 1980). Also, these three faiths associate all bounty as blessings deriving from the Almighty and view man as caretaker (*khala’if*) or steward (see Mazhar-Hussaini, 1992).

Many philanthropic concepts that we practice today are derived directly from biblical concepts such as the tithe, stewardship, free-loan societies, and laws guiding charitable contributions. The Talmud (the Jewish Oral Law written between 200–600 C.E.) details nine specific biblical acts of charity. These include providing food to the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, educating orphans, sheltering the homeless, providing dowries for indigent brides, burying the dead, comforting mourners, and ransoming captives (Bogen, 1969).

Biblical stories and parables are filled with accounts of extraordinary philanthropic behavior. Children often learn these stories at an early age, identify with characters as heroes, and easily recite them by heart. Many religious concepts have become part of American culture. For example, so-called Good Samaritan laws (their

name is based on the biblical story) are state liability laws that protect citizens who go out of their way to help others.

Roots of religious philanthropy in America

America was founded on principles of religious expression. In his farewell speech, George Washington cited religion and morality as the indispensable supports of American society (London, 2000). Religion has played a critical role in fostering social change, including the abolition movement and the early labor movement. Robert Bellah and others (1986) note, “There has not been a major issue in the history of the United States on which religious bodies did not speak out, publicly and vociferously” (p. 10). Even a religious movement with mixed results, such as the temperance movement, had a positive influence during the early 1800s when rapid industrialization and urbanization put strains on many American social institutions (Wilson, 2002).

During the nineteenth century, the rise of the Sunday school movement led to innovations, including free schooling, leadership training in religious youth work, and the start of youth conventions (Lynn and Wright, 1971; Dean and Yost, 1991). Growth in Sunday schools and other independent sector movements was fueled by the religious fervor begun with the Second Awakening—a YMCA movement—and the creation of many new faith-based, independent colleges across the country. These are important examples of social change prompted by religious philanthropy (Wilson, 2002).

Importance of religion today

Religion continues to be an important aspect of life for most Americans. According to sociologist Robert Wuthnow, “America’s churches, synagogues, meeting houses, and fellowship halls constitute a vast and often perplexing feature of our nation’s collective life” (1990, p. 3). There are an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 local

congregations in the United States; 95 percent of Americans believe in God, 70 percent belong to a congregation, and 40 percent regularly attend religious services (Wood and Houghland, 1990).

Moreover, religion exerts an important influence on philanthropy. Nearly half (47 percent) of all philanthropic giving in America goes to religious institutions and causes (INDEPENDENT SECTOR, 2000). People who attend religious services regularly tend to be bigger givers, and they volunteer more often. Youth who belong to congregations are more likely to volunteer.

Faith-based organizations also exert a positive impact on “non-religious” philanthropy. For example, higher levels of religious involvement correlate with higher involvement and giving to non-church-related charities, such as the United Way and youth organizations (Wood and Houghland, 1990).

Many religious organizations have received high marks for working in areas of high risk, such as drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and crime prevention. Harvard economist Richard Freeman calls this the faith factor (Shapiro, 1996). John DiIulio (1995) attributes faith-based organizations’ success in curbing youth crime and stabilizing inner-city neighborhoods to their ability to build spiritual capital.

Best age to teach philanthropy

Studies suggest that caring and sharing can be taught at all ages (Bentley and Nissan, 1996). This learning begins very early. Infants can exhibit empathic behavior within the first few years of life (Eisenberg, 1992). In his research on learning to care, Wuthnow (1997) calls these beginning roots of philanthropy “primordial caring” (p. 3). According to Wuthnow, primordial caring has two parts. The first is empathy, which is learned by being cared for. The second is cognitive. This cognitive understanding is based on “conversations we have with our parents or overhear them having. They come from going to church, attending school, watching television, and interacting with friends” (p. 4).

Jeavons (1994) shares the following early childhood (primordial caring) recollection of learning to give at his church:

Many of us will remember being in worship services with our parents and how important it was for us to put something in the plate (like mom and dad) during the offering. While this may seem like it could be a superficial imitation of behavior, children often quickly internalize the rationales for and attitudes behind such giving—the idea of contributing to group, the feeling of obligation (and opportunity) to share in its work, and so on—as well as actual practice. [p. 2]

This early, or primordial, learning occurs primarily in the home. Children learn empathy by being cared for and by taking care of others. They experience this from parents, family members, and neighbors. Today, many more children rely on sources outside the home, such as day care providers or messages they see in books, on videos, and on television.

The importance of faith-based philanthropic concepts is likely to increase as children begin to develop cognitive and language skills by age three or four. Many religious children's books and videos are filled with examples of helping and sharing. These books can introduce children to powerful religious role models and many stories evolving around altruistic behavior.

Best time to learn to give

Acts of giving are situation-specific and complicated. There is rarely such a thing as a standard contribution. Donors need to take into consideration the worthiness of the cause, its validity, and how much one can afford to give. As youth get older, they can begin to grapple with these complex philanthropic issues. Wuthnow (1997) calls this aspect of charity mature or reflective caring.

Some who have tried to systematically teach volunteering and giving as a subject matter have identified middle school as a good age to introduce the curriculum (Bentley and Nissan, 1996). For

example, the Youth Understanding Philanthropy Project—a five-year study at the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy—identified middle school (grades four through eight) as a particularly opportune time to introduce service learning and reflective philanthropic exercises, given children’s cognitive and social skills at that age (Bentley and Nissan, 1996).

Teaching philanthropy to older children is important because they have the cognitive-moral skill necessary to grasp these more complex topics. Furthermore, older youth are most at risk. Wuthnow (1997) sees the more pressing issue as how to promote mature or reflective caring. This type of caring is not learned automatically but requires interpersonal skills.

Power of service learning

Middle school is a good age to introduce youth to service learning in schools, congregations, and youth-serving groups, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. Research suggests that young people engaged in congregation-sponsored service have stronger ties to their congregations; such participation nurtures faith development and healthy lifestyles (Benson and Roehlkepartain, 1993).

Religious philanthropic practices

Youth involved with congregations and religious youth-serving groups are often exposed to more volunteer opportunities. Wood and Houghland (1990) note that religious organizations “effectively plug us into structures of action that . . . press us to implement those values and provide us with opportunities to do so” (p. 99). Faith-based organizations frequently sponsor service projects, religious outreach efforts, and social action efforts. These events provide a safe, structured environment in which youth can develop interpersonal skills and share their talents with others.

Moreover, youth involved in religious settings are likely to learn philanthropic values that are tied directly to their faith. Many religious philanthropic practices are built into holidays, lifecycle events, and everyday life (Plotinsky, 1995).

High school and beyond

Engaging older youth is particularly challenging. Benson (1997) emphasizes that youth ages fifteen to eighteen are most at risk in high school. Older youth are more likely to drop out of congregation life and youth group activities.

Many religious practices meant to reaffirm religious rights of passage, such as bar mitzvahs and confirmations, unfortunately turn out to be points of checking out. Religious commitment declines in adolescence (Benson, Donahue, and Erikson, 1989). However, engaging teens in service is seen as an effective way to address this “adolescent apostasy.” Given the busy school and after-school schedule of most youth these days, more faith-based programs are starting out-of-town activities on weekends and during the summer. These programs focus on strengthening faith, building teams, and promoting social action and religious outreach. Some programs are local and sponsored by congregations, but often they are run by national organizations and bring together youth from several communities.

National youth service and its faith-based counterpart

The concept of offering youth long-term voluntary service opportunities to solve public problems is not new. Peace Corps and VISTA are two successful national service programs created by President Kennedy in the 1960s. More recently, the government established AmeriCorp—a network of national service programs meant to encourage public service and compassion in young peo-

ple. AmeriCorp began in the 1990s by President Clinton, partially in response to concerns about declining civil society.

Intensive summer youth programming that focuses on service is a great way to teach philanthropy to youth. Religious outreach or missionary work is probably the biggest success story in promoting philanthropy.

Religious settings to teach philanthropy

Children can benefit by learning philanthropic lessons in many settings. Faith-based service-learning programs in schools, congregations, and youth-service groups can assist families in this long-term endeavor.

So what religious settings are most fertile for promoting philanthropy? What are the strengths and challenges in each setting?

Home

Home is the best religious setting for empathy and caring. That families face many challenges today does not alter the fact that home is still the most important place to promote philanthropic values, especially for younger children. Efforts to strengthen philanthropy outside the home sometimes shift attention away from the critical importance of parents in promoting caring and giving, especially as they relate to religious faith.

Many religious values and practices naturally center on home life. A number of denominations recognize this and encourage families to designate special time. Families need to take advantage of this literal “sacred time”—possibly a special meal associated with the day of worship, a family tradition associated with a holiday, or other special family time or traditions. Consider the following two examples:

Sabbath—a sacred point in time. For observant Jews, the Sabbath—from sunset Friday until Saturday night—is a special respite from the busy week and a time to strengthen family ties. No

telephone calls. No television. Traditionally, this is a day to invite guests for meals, visit neighbors, and study the Torah.

Mormons' Monday family night. For most members of the Church of the Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), Monday is family night. Mormon religious leaders declared Monday a special family night and called on families to stay home and turn off the outside world. As a way to strengthen the family, each Monday Mormons around the world set aside the evening for family activities. To encourage family night, LDS schedules no official church events on Mondays. LDS also publishes a resource guide suggesting specific events, including many activities that promote giving and serving.

Schools

Many middle and high school districts have been at the forefront of efforts to integrate service and voluntarism into the school curriculum (Cairn, 1993; Kinsley and McPherson, 1995). As a result, schools offer a large body of resource guides, textbooks, and case studies. Parochial schools have great opportunity to tap into service learning to reinforce religious values related to philanthropy. Consider the experience of two Indianapolis high schools: Heritage Christian and Cathedral High School.

Once a week, about thirty students from Heritage Christian—a nondenominational Evangelical Christian high school in Indianapolis—hop on a bus after school and travel across town to teach phonics and math to children at the Wheeler Community Center, which serves underprivileged children. Sharing their faith, along with their academic skills, is an important motivator. For many students, this activity is the highlight of their day. The program is popular, and there is a waiting list to join.

Like many Catholic high schools, Cathedral High School established a service-learning program to promote volunteerism and “faith-formation.” Many of the community-based volunteer and fundraising projects are secular; however, there is the opportunity to integrate religious values. A goal is to promote a “Catholic

Christian vision of ‘service’ rooted in the person and message of Jesus” (LaNave, 2002, p. 1).

Schools face two major constraints in teaching philanthropy. First, they are overloaded with a full curriculum and often specially mandated topics. As most teachers will attest, schools are often called on to correct problems, be it drug abuse, smoking, or voter apathy. Second, public schools must refrain from favoring any religion. This is why schools promote generic values and avoid or, as some say, downplay, the importance of religion.

Congregations

Churches, synagogues, and mosques are natural settings in which to promote giving and serving to youth. Since the advent of the Sunday school movement, congregations have sought ways to reach out and engage their next generation of members. Dean (1991) found that despite wide diversity of theological perspectives, religious youth programming shares remarkably similar goals across Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faith traditions. These include an emphasis on instilling faith identity, engaging youth to become active voluntary members, and promoting healthy adolescent development.

Youth have opportunities to engage in philanthropic activities in a variety of congregational programs, including formal religious instruction, worship services, youth groups, youth leadership programs, and community service (Dean, 1991). In the social ambience of congregations, youth are constantly exposed to models of giving and serving. The theme of helping others penetrates most activities, including social outings. For example, a study of fifty-eight Indianapolis congregations found that fifty-seven supported various community action projects (Wood and Houghland, 1990). A national study of more than six hundred Presbyterian congregations found that 86 percent welcomed outside community groups and programs using their facilities. In these settings, youth see philanthropy being modeled by family members and other positive role models. Moreover, youth have ample opportunities to engage in acts of giving and serving in a safe and controlled environment.

Youth-serving groups

National youth service, such as through AmeriCorp and Campus Compact, is heralded as another possible approach to instilling the volunteer spirit. These federal initiatives are modeled on the success of the Peace Corps and VISTA. Many religious denominations have their own version of national youth service; each year, hundreds of thousands of youth volunteer for religious outreach or missionary programs. They give up their summers and up to two years of their lives to leave home and devote their attention to serving in a variety of outreach efforts. These outreach or missionary programs exert a strong influence on religious youth. As one former missionary volunteer states: "What you did as missionaries goes on and on; it has a ripple effect into eternity" (Ostling and Ostling, 1999, p. 214).

Although program goals differ markedly, religious youth outreach programs probably exert a stronger effect on building community and fostering a volunteer spirit than government-sponsored national service programs. For example, on any given day there are sixty thousand Mormon youth in the field serving as full-time volunteers around the world (Ostling and Ostling, 1999). By comparison, the Peace Corps Web site reports its total volunteer force at seven thousand (www.peacecorp.org/about/fact.cfm). The level of youth volunteer commitment in many religious outreach programs is impressive.

Although the primary aim of service is to proselytize, the philanthropic aspects of missionary zeal are tremendous. Ostling and Ostling (1999) describe these benefits:

Mission duty taps powerfully into youthful idealism, the desire that adolescents have to be part of something bigger than they are. For two years, they set aside everything in their own lives, their education, their professional goals, their personal relationships, to serve the church wherever the church elects to send them. [p. 215]

Youth missionary outreach is more often associated with fundamentalist and evangelical denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God, and the Mormons. However,

many mainstream Protestant and Jewish denominations are strengthening their youth outreach efforts as well. For example, in response to high assimilation rates, Jewish organizations have stepped up outreach efforts. Many of these summer and year-abroad programs for study in Israel rely on youth who volunteer to teach and lead activities that promote Jewish identity.

Perhaps the greatest impact of these outreach programs is on the youth volunteers themselves.

The real genius of the Mormon missionary system is its effect on its own members, especially young people. . . . At an age when the youth of most religions are beginning to avoid church activities, Mormon youngsters are baby-sitting, mowing lawns, and pumping gas after school . . . to cover expenses when they serve a mission. [Ostling and Ostling, 1999, p. 214]

A Mormon leader adds, “We want them to say, ‘This is the best two years of my life,’ and to return each one a convert to the church himself” (Ostling and Ostling, 1999, p. 215). Another former Mormon missionary states, “They learn how to immerse themselves in serving others” (p. 214).

Conclusion

When the prophet Samson’s father, Manoach, asked an angel for advice on how to raise their very special child, it is said that the angel advised Manoach and his wife to change their own behavior and become their son’s role models. It would not suffice to teach Samson how to become a righteous leader of his people if he did not see that behavior modeled in his home. The same is true for philanthropic behavior. If we want our children to be philanthropic, we must be philanthropic ourselves.

Families, irrespective of faith, are more apt to embrace efforts to teach philanthropy to their children if these values strike them as relevant and important. So it is with religious families. Parents who care about religion are more likely to embrace efforts by schools,

congregations, and youth-serving groups insofar as they promote the values of philanthropy held and modeled in the home.

The strains on America's social fabric were very much on the minds of researchers at the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy when they embarked on the Youth Understanding Philanthropy Project to examine the state of young people's attitudes and behaviors toward giving and serving (Bentley and Nissan, 1996; Bentley, Weber, and Hall-Russell, 1999). This five-year study was prompted by a concern that negative cultural forces, coupled with a decline in the family structure, were jeopardizing the ability of families to transmit philanthropic values to their children.

To chronicle the variety and extent of programs, the researchers gathered and reviewed a large body of curriculum materials such as class syllabi, teaching guides, videos, and books. These materials were drawn from a broad range of sources, including school-based, government, and foundation initiatives designed to spur civic involvement, volunteerism, and fundraising.

Given the rich tradition of philanthropy in America, it was not surprising that the study uncovered a wealth of programs promoting various aspects of prosocial or altruistic behavior such as community service, fundraising, and charitable giving. These efforts targeted youth of all ages. They were housed in various settings, both religious and secular. Some programs were part of the formal school curriculum; others took place after school in congregations and youth-serving organizations such as the Boy Scouts and 4-H.

Faith-based programs seemed successful at integrating religious obligations of giving and service with other concepts of character development. Parents often displayed high comfort and commitment levels in religious settings that link volunteerism and service to religious outreach. These positive signs are not surprising, as giving in religious settings is less likely to be viewed as just a nice thing to do but rather the right thing to do. This sense of obligation is captured by the popular Christian phrase, "What would Jesus do?"

To understand the powerful sway of religion on philanthropy, one only needs to contrast the names of religious heroes with the

pillars of traditional philanthropy. The names Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller may be held in vast respect—even in awe in some quarters—but they pale in comparison to the names of religious heroes such as Moses, Jesus, or Mohammed, who are likely to be listed by any religiously observant youngster.

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