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Faith Perspectives on Building Strong Volunteer Programs

John Gavin

Curtis J. VanderWaal Dr.
Andrews University, vanderwa@andrews.edu

W. Ellis

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**FAITH PERSPECTIVES ON BUILDING STRONG VOLUNTEER
PROGRAMS**

By: John Gavin

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Faith Perspectives on Building Strong Volunteer Programs

How does our faith impact our interest in volunteering in support of community programs? Do religious practices make us more inclined or less inclined to get involved? More broadly what are the faith perspectives that drive and shape volunteerism? What do these perspectives mean in terms of building strong volunteer programs in organizations and churches? Faith Perspectives on Building Strong Volunteer Programs explores these questions.

During the summer of 2012 a study was conducted among Seventh-day Adventist college and university faculty and staff exploring their faith practices and involvement in the community. A random sample of approximately 1/3 of all faculty and key staff of all Adventist universities and colleges in the U.S. received an email invitation and a link to participate in the study. The 2012 SDA Yearbook was the primary source of the sample. SuveyMonkey was used for online data collection and compilation with SPSS used for other statistical analysis. The survey replicates a 2004 Religion and Public Issues Survey (Dudley & Hernandez, 2004). This study also used questions from Gallup Poll, Faith Matters Survey, National Civic and Political Survey of Young People.

Overall 530 collegiates responded. The number of faculty and staff responses is almost evenly split, 50% and 47%. Similarly, the number of male and female faculty and staff was about even (49% vs. 51%); with 79% reporting they were married. Respondents were generally older, with more than half (55%) being 51 years or older. They were also very highly educated, with three-fourths (75%) have completed post-college graduate study or degrees and another 16% having completed a four-year college degree. Over three-fourths (76%) self-identified as White Euro-American, with 9% identifying as Black/African American. There were approximately an equal number of Hispanic/Latinos and Asian or Pacific Islanders (5% each). Almost half (45%) of faculty and staff reported total household income to be above \$75,000, with another 28% reporting income between \$50,000 – \$75,000. Based on Adventist pay scales, these amounts likely represent two-income families. In short, faculty and staff of Adventist

institutions are more likely to be white, married, second generation Adventists who are above middle age, well educated, and earning steady income. As a demographic slice of Adventism, thought leaders, the educators of thought leaders, and the experiences of Adventist collegiates reveal important perspectives that can help us understand volunteerism and how to harness the power of individual volunteers in support of our work as Christian social workers.

We hypothesized that church volunteering and community service was positively associated with church attendance and other religious behaviors. Other research supports this hypothesis. As Bekkers (2003) reports regular churchgoers are better integrated within church-based social networks than those who never attend church. Being part of such networks enhances the chance to volunteer. Similarly, research on church attendance suggests that social networks, rather than beliefs or church membership, are a primary motivator in volunteering both within and outside the church. (Becker & Dhingra, 2001). Park and Smith (2000) indicate that church attendance may influence volunteering by fostering a sense of community.

All of the respondents indicated that they volunteer for church work several times per year or more, with 51% saying they volunteer at least monthly. Sixty nine percent are at least occasionally involved in community or civic projects sponsored by the church. Sixty six people served as an officer or committee for some organization in the past year. A full sixty percent said they had worked on a community project in the past year. Forty eight percent are members of a serve club that does projects to improve the community. Forty five percent worked with someone or some group to solve a community problem. The same percentage was active in outreach or witnessing activities in the past year. Still it is not known whether religious behaviors increase volunteering or if volunteering increases religious behaviors or if there is a reciprocal effect. Also, Adventist faculty and staff seem to be more active in volunteering in their communities than the average Adventist member. The 2001 World Church (Adventist) Survey revealed that only 29% of Adventists are involved in their community.

Analysis of the responses looked at the relationship between religious behaviors such as prayer, bible study, reading religious books and journals, holding family worship, church attendance, tithing, and volunteer work for the church and participation in church, as well as giving tithe and offerings. These findings supported the hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between religious behaviors and volunteerism. Giving tithes and offerings and holding family worship were slightly more highly correlated for Adventist faculty and staff. That is, those who gave a higher percent of their income to the church and or other religious causes were more likely to volunteer in the church and in the community and work with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community. We speculate that those who give tithe and offerings have a greater commitment to church, are more committed to supporting all forms of volunteering. In short they put the money and time where their commitment is. Those who hold family worship are also more likely to volunteer in church or the community. We speculate that those involved in the community are more likely to center their worship discussion around their community involvement and discuss the linkage of faith and practice.

There were findings related to demographic variables in the study of Adventist collegiates that relate to volunteerism. Individuals over fifty (especially 65 plus) are more likely than others to volunteer for the church, serve as an officer or committee member, work together with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community or be involved in outreach or witnessing activities. Older people are more stable, have more available, and have more status and thus most likely to hold leadership positions in church or volunteer initiatives. Similarly, married persons who are more stable, lead church-centric lives and are more committed to the structure of the church are more likely to volunteer for the church or in their communities. Finally, those with more education are more likely to volunteer. Those with higher education are groomed for and expected to participate in leadership positions and their status and leadership may increase their community engagement.

Clearly, religious behaviors are associated with volunteering and service, although the exact relationship is unclear. Other themes that emerged from the study of Adventist collegiates include: volunteering begets volunteering; social networks are key to understanding volunteering and service, and an activist profile of newer/returning member. These themes are complex and dealt with in detail by other researchers including Bekker & Dhingra (2001, and 2003), DeHart (1999), Hodgkinson, Weitzman & Kirsch (1990), Watt (1991), Wilson & Musick (1999) as well as Park & Smith (2000), Ruiter and DeGraff (2006), Bryant (2003), Musick, Wilson & Bynam (2000), Hart Atkins and Ford (1996), Lichterman (1996), Wuthnow (1998),

In summary, more exploration is necessary to understand these themes and what they mean for volunteerism particularly in specific settings or within different faith-traditions. Still several recommendations seem practical in promoting volunteerism 1) since giving tithe and offerings are linked we should pair service opportunities and fundraising/giving programming. 2) Since marriage and family worship are linked we should build faith through service by supporting family involvement in church and community activities. 3) Seniors should be encouraged to become more active in all aspects of church and community service and we should develop service clubs and small groups that feature service for retired persons. 4) Focus on both individual and group involvement – involvement begets involvement. Also, congregations must not only provide unique programs, but help members feel connected. Social bonds encourage stronger connections. 5) Tie in prayer, Bible study, family workshop and witnessing into the theme of “involvement in the church and in the world.” 5) Re-orient the way we “assimilate” new members to wire them into the friendship/kinship networks that exist in congregations otherwise we risk losing their involvement. 6) Finally because volunteerism is complex with underlying motivations and only partially understood, we must create broader avenues for involvement.

An exploration of the broader faith perspective on the nature of humankind, social justice, service and the role Christians assume with regard to the needs of people also informs our efforts to

build strong volunteer programs. These have been the subject of countless presentations, sermons, articles, books, and college courses.

Whatever the philosophical or conceptual groundwork; a practical framework for building new volunteer programs or strengthening existing programs is needed. Elements for such a framework include: organizational readiness, recruiting, screening and matching, evaluation of volunteers, and making use of unaffiliated and untrained volunteers who respond spontaneously to community events such as a disaster or other crisis.

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