

Are 'faith-based initiatives' good for congregations?

By Martin E. Marty

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“Did the Faith-based Initiative Change Congregations?” asked astute sociologists of religion Bob Wineberg and Mark Chaves in the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* in March 2010. The answer: No.

Chaves, based at Duke University, follows up with a further refinement in *The Christian Century* on 1 June 2010: “Congregations Say No to the Faith-based Initiative: Thanks, but No Thanks.” He is referring to the Congress-launched programme to tap the energies and genius of religious organizations, “including congregations, to meet social needs.”

Recognizing that the programme had been controversial from the first, often on grounds coded as “church-state relations,” Chaves analyzed follow-up studies to see whether the tapping had been productive. Again: No.

Chaves is anything but an anti-institutional, anti-congregational muckraker, doomsayer, or secular snob. His career is devoted to assessing what role crucial institutions like congregations (parishes, mosques, synagogue) can and do achieve. We can picture him having hoped that this innovation would work.

“Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services and Jewish Family Services” do work big time, he notes. It’s hard to imagine American voluntary life without such large agencies, something the “spiritual but not religious” or “religious but non-institutional” citizens don’t often notice.

But, once more, “did the faith-based initiative have any impact on congregations? Did it prompt congregations to get more involved in providing social services?” Again, no and no.

Failure followed because those in charge worked with false assumptions. One was “that congregation-based social services represent an alternative to the social welfare system.” No, they don’t. Chaves: “The reality is that there is no such alternative system in the religious world.”

Congregations are not an alternative; their social services depend on “the current system.” “It is much more common for a congregation to plug into an existing program than to start a new one.”

False assumption two: that “congregations represent a vast reservoir of volunteer labour.” Do they? No. Most congregations are small, internally diverse, peopled by believers who can’t all be mobilized to serve. Pay no attention to the anti-government and anti-taxing people who say we can all take care of the neighbor in need just by being generous one at a time or as congregations.

Don’t write congregations off; Chaves does not, by any means. He simply observes what they are good at. “Congregations are good at mobilizing people. But they are good at mobilizing small groups of volunteers to conduct well-defined tasks on a periodic basis,” most notably disaster relief.

Congregations do well collaborating with organizations “like homeless shelters and Habitat for Humanity,” that are good at using the best congregational resources: “small groups of volunteers carrying out well-defined, limited tasks.” The room for fresh definition is vast; the number of limited tasks is without limit.

Chaves is consistently suggesting, based on rich data, that those who want to dream of non-governmental or non-secular forms of addressing social needs are utopian. Congregations play an enormous role in the economy of social care, but they have to be free to find and exercise that role in partnership, along with, and at the side of non-congregational approaches.

The anti-government, anti-tax, anti-secular Bible-believers have – or should have – a problem with Paul’s Letter to the Romans, 13:4, where “authorities,” a.k.a. “government,” “is God’s servant for your good;” or 13:6, “For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants.” We see.

References:

Bob Wineberg and Mark Chaves, 'Did the Faith-Based Initiative Change Congregations?', in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (March 2010).

Mark Chaves, 'Congregations Say No to the Faith-based Initiative: Thanks, but No Thanks,' in *Christian Century* (1 June 2010).

(c) **Martin E. Marty** The author is a leading US commentator on religion. His biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com [1].

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