VOLUNTEERING BY RELIGIOUS GROUPS: THE HALF-AWAKE GIANT

By Alice Leppert

NOT SLEEPING, BUT HALF-awake. A giant in size and influence, yet only partially awake to current trends and changing perspectives. This image of today's voluntary effort on the part of religious groups reveals both its existing power and its unfulfilled potential.

As for sheer size, the contribution of church and synagogue members to community life in thousands of towns, villages and cities is immense. The Judeo-Christian tradition has always had a mandate to respond to the needs of people outside the walls of the religious institution itself. This response to need is equally valid when given through a secular community agency as it is through a religious-based one. The form of the response can be action to influence public decision-making on critical social issues or it can be action to provide or assist with needed community services.

Local congregational leaders encourage and support a wide variety of programs. In the area of issues and public policy, they have undertaken awareness efforts on social, educational and environmental conditions as a step toward responsible resolutions to problems. In a New Jersey university town, for example, a Presbyterian minister and a lay member of the same church last year participated in a long and arduous discussion on the advisability of certain types of genetic research by the university. In Missouri, a religious group endorsed a bond issue for a much-needed detention home, thus paving the way for major reforms in the juvenile justice system.

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Added to the many issue-oriented types of activity, congregational leaders have developed over the years significant, on-going community development or self-help projects. Goodwill Industries, a nationwide, sheltered workshop for the handicapped, was founded by a Boston minister. Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC), a training program for unemployed minority youth operating in more than 125 locations, was pioneered by a Philadelphia Baptist minister. A Roman Catholic Sister was instrumental in the formation of The Southern Mutual Help Association, a community development program operating in the Louisiana sugarcane area. A South Carolina Sea Island congregation helped launch a comprehensive health care agency, long before HMO's (health maintenance organizations) were discovered by the press. Members of a Midwest synagogue developed an essential city-wide tutoring program for young minority high school students who needed assistance in preparing for their college entrance exams.

These and many other human service programs arising from religious motivation make up a large part of the total voluntary picture in any given community. This religiously oriented voluntary action is not always perceived by others as related to the faith communities. Nevertheless, most congregational-level participants in community projects have a religious conviction about their tasks although they do not always wear a religious label on their sleeves.

Apart from community volunteering, there is a volume of activity within the typical congregation which rightfully can be called volunteering. There are teachers of children and youth, there are assistants to congregational leaders, there are policymakers on various boards and committees. When one considers how many thousands of religious communities are in session each Sunday, each Sabbath, and during the week, the amount of volunteering is phenomenal. This is confirmed by the ACTION report *Americans Volunteer 1974,* which noted that the largest number of volunteers in the U.S. in a representative week were those volunteering within the walls of the various religious institutions.

Another indication of the "people power" of various religious bodies is the well-known inclination of many community leaders to tap local congregations on behalf of their own projects. Volunteers can be rounded up and so can financial support. Many congregations will also post notices in their publications, thus providing free channels of information for all kinds of community programs. The situation has elements of humor, for if a congregation ever needed more volunteers for its own in-house or community outreach projects, it could profit from studying the many successful ploys

used by outside groups on its own members.

WHEN ONE TAKES A CLOSER look at the great array of religious-based voluntary action, however, there is more to observe than size and influence. One senses a mood of unreleased potential. There may be many reasons for this locked-up energy, but one major, relatively unnoticed development warrants special attention—the outcomes of the struggle for self-determination by local volunteers.

The history of the past dozen or so years is instructive in this regard. In the main, the action followed a recognizable pattern. Local congregations and local religious bodies pulled away from unquestioning acceptance of national level points of view. Local volunteers asserted their right to make their own choices about the kind of voluntary action deemed necessary to community well-being. They rejected centralized, national-level decision-making and made their own evaluation of neighborhood programs. They achieved local control and management of community-based activities. They moved into human service programs and into support for more effective health, education and social services in the community. Meanwhile, national level leadership did not always see eye to eye with local priorities, for some had formed their own ideas of what constitutes effective voluntary action.

A recent conversation which took place in a Florida west coast city dramatizes this shift toward local autonomy and the gap between local and national attitudes. Several national leaders were observing some older women volunteers sorting and mending huge stacks of clothing for emergency use by migrant, low-income and neighborhood families. One of the visiting national leaders, unimpressed by the whole scene, told the managers of the clothing exchange that the volunteers, in her opinion, were "behind the times and should have closed up the project long ago in favor of political action." The manager replied, "We're here because the migrants and the neighborhood people want this center to operate, and as long as they support it, we intend to stay at this location and keep our doors open. In the meantime, we need every one of our senior citizen volunteers to help at the center."

The manager was saying in effect that the clothing exchange center was just one answer to an authentic community need. In spite of the lack of enthusiasm on the part of national leadership for what was perceived as an outmoded Good Samaritan response, the center would continue its community service. By working at the center, the women were not objecting to needed political action by other volunteers but were choosing to provide a needed "recycling" service which they knew was acceptable to the community and was within their ability to provide.

Another illustration of this shift toward local decision-making was the action taken by an East Coast congregation after receiving suggestions from a national office about ways of responding to urban crises. A committee was authorized to contact the leadership of an inner city agency to find out what was needed by the neighorhood people as determined by the people themselves and match this with the congregation's ability to financial and human resources.

After months of careful listening to the people and first-hand observation of the deplorable conditions they faced, the congregation felt it should respond to the urgent request by the inner city people to help with a specific health problem—the lack of dental care. A neighborhood dental clinic was set up, office supplies secured, professional care arranged, and long-term support guaranteed.

When the report of the action was sent to the national office, it was clear that it would have preferred a report listing a march on city hall, a protest meeting, or some other highly visible, highly vocal, short-term response. It was also clear that the national office was downplaying community-services approaches to social change even when these services were provided at the request of the people involved. The local congregation, however, certain of its own knowledge of community desires, went ahead with the project.

These East Coast volunteers and many other local groups gradually developed a sure knowledge of the human service needs of their neighborhood. They used the styles of operation which suited their neighborhoods. They exercised the important skills of policy-making and program management. They developed ways to guarantee public participation.

Furthermore, some local leaders began to underscore their new authority and control by the power of the purse. Instead of responding automatically to financial quota requests from national headquarters, they retained large portions of locally raised funds for their own locally operated programs. They successfully challenged the older practice of sending local monies to national offices for distribution back to other local communities according to national priorities which were set without prior local input and agreement.

In other words, consumerism in the broad sense of the word penetrated the local religious scene. The leaders of community efforts now set their own locally accepted goals for human services in the health, education, and social services fields. These consumer movement pioneers were the minority and low-income groups within the various religious congregations and their supporters from these same religious bodies. They were a major factor in the transfer of power from national to local levels.

The move toward autonomy resulted in the formation of large numbers of human services programs by religiously motivated citizens. These included such programs as day care centers, nutrition programs, half-way houses, older adult programs, neighborhood clinics, crisis intervention centers, youth employment and training programs, tutoring programs and emergency centers for food, clothing and furniture. While the programs were largely spontaneous developments, there were some notable exceptions. Several national religious bodies initiated and still continue to sponsor certain human service programs needed by community residents.

In time, many of the locally initiated programs served the entire community, not just the members of various religious groups. This community-wide approach made it possible to acquire legal incorporation for the program and to receive funds from government, foundations and other sources. In most cases, sponsorship by the original religious body was not ignored, for some of their representatives became active board members with a strong voice in policy-making for the incorporated agency.

This new grass-roots strength was increased by the preoccupation of some national offices with the more dramatic, issue-raising, advocacy approaches. Leadership development for local programs received minimal attention as national efforts concentrated on analysis and discussion, awareness or consciousness-raising exercises and methods of influencing public policy. The net effect was a downgrading of the steady, long-term human services needed by the aging, the young, the sick, and others with special health, education and social service needs. Volunteering in the human

services came to be regarded as a substandard religious expression of commitment to the community. And further, the human service delivery systems were often presumed to be the duty and obligation primarily of government, not the voluntary sector.

In addition, some national leadership, influenced strongly by one wing of the feminist movement, backed away entirely from the concept of volunteering. The direct-service volunteer became a specific target for disapproval. Some felt that this type of volunteer contributed to economic injustice by taking away jobs from workers who could have been employed in the various programs. Women with paid jobs, on the other hand, were "proving their worth" by receiving a pay check. The phrase "just a volunteer" held as little attraction as "just a housewife" — someone with half the talent and half the dependability of a paid worker. On the other hand, advocacy volunteering was seldom if ever identified as volunteering. It was referred to as citizen involvement, justice ministry, social action, public policy-making, or by similar phrases of approbation.

The national-level neglect of leadership needs for local community-action, direct-service programs left a vacuum on the local level which was filled by other volunteer-serving agencies. Over the past decade, grassroots volunteers turned in increasing numbers to new community sources of training and education. This is a trend which shows no sign of reversing.

State and community colleges, with their continuing education mandate to serve all public needs, are making the most of their growing opportunities. They are reaching out to all volunteers, religious organizations, and other groups with responsibility for operating programs. They have expertise in the nontraditional or nonformal approaches to education and are using these methods in their training offerings. The New Jersey Montclair State College's 1977-78 courses on "Community and Educational Program Development in Human Services" and on "Training and Development in Adult Organizations" are typical of many such local opportunities.

Other local program leaders are discovering the training resources of the Voluntary Action Centers (VACS), Volunteer Bureaus and state offices of volunteerism. Some are finding various organizational development institutes quite helpful. These agencies supply short-term seminars in fiscal responsibility, goal-setting techniques, board effectiveness, staff and volunteer effectiveness and other essentials of good management.

THE QUESTION WHICH NEEDS to be addressed by religious leadership concerns the quality of the interaction between local congregations and their national or connectional offices. Are the leaders of both groups undertaking a joint reappraisal of the consequences of well-intentioned but lopsided, unholistic action? Are they scrutinizing together some of the popular but inadequate strategies for social change? Are grassroots desires not only listened to but accepted? Cooperative progress along these lines will help free the giant of religious-based voluntary action so that it can move ahead with more vigor and greater self-confidence.

First, there is increased recognition of the importance of utilizing volunteers for their competencies rather than their availability or status. Congregational members with particular gifts and proven knowledge in specialized fields are being sought for volunteer assistance to community programs and to programs within the religious community. These volunteers often take short-term assignments designed to fit their personal schedules and look upon their contributions as a form of technical assistance. They include librarians, reading consultants, media experts, financial advisors, urban planners, child development and youth guidance instructors, and business managers. The noticeable increase in volunteering by men is probably associated with this trend toward competency recruitment. The growing willingness of staff to utilize volunteers with these special capabilities is a welcome mark of maturity.

Second, there is a better understanding of the way volunteer programs fit into the larger, more comprehensive efforts of the entire community. Increasingly, leaders see the importance of relating to other agencies holding the same overall goals. There is evidence that leaders realize direct service approaches and advocacy approaches should be mutually supportive. Comprehensive planning by communities is helping to eliminate overlap and foster more effective ways of using volunteer resources. Comprehensive approaches increase the cooperation among varied groups of volunteers, all of whom accept the commonly held major goals for community betterment.

A Colorado director of a strong meals-on-wheels program, for example, uses

church facilities and recruits volunteers from many congregations and community organizations. She manages the nutrition program while she serves on the town board which identifies and plans for all other unmet nutritional needs. As a member of this board, she functions as an advocate for comprehensive, community-wide approach to nutrition needs and backs up the plan by working for its adoption by the town government. Because of her willingness to serve as program manager and advocate, the whole community benefits from her contribution. Community volunteers for the meals-on-wheels program and citizens interested in government approaches are gaining increased respect for each other's contributions.

The beneficial effects of this comprehensive, holistic approach also can be seen in the religious-based volunteering in the criminal justice field. Voluntary action programs in the preventive areas focus on strengthened programs for family services, youth employment opportunities, education and tutoring, recreation, diagnostic physical and mental health, etc. At the same time, there is public-interest volunteering for necessary changes in penal codes, court procedures and police administration. Legal services for low-income groups and community-based correctional facilities are developed as needed. The increased understanding of the interacting elements in the total picture frees volunteers to concentrate on their respective chosen parts of the action.

A third encouraging sign is that volunteers are showing a greater readiness to look at the consequences of their proposed solutions before rushing into action. They see more clearly that unanticipated reactions can wreck the outcomes of well-intentioned strategies. They see, too, that using the environmentalists' technique of preparing an impact statement can be effectively used for all areas of planning. Volunteers are learning that the whole process of good decision-making goes sour when probable harmful effects are not anticipated and eliminated in advance.

A case in point is the experience of a health outreach program in a Northeast inner city. The community board planned to open a neighborhood clinic. In spite of the temptation to hire a doctor immediately, they sensed that a large budget item for professional services was unrealistic for their group. After a frustrating delay, they finally discovered that the federal government had a program for subsidizing the placement of young physicians in needy areas. By using this service, they headed off the threat of financial chaos which could have ruined the clinic in short order.

Fourth, the development of closer ties between religious-based and secular-based volunteerism is generating mutually helpful relationships. There is growing support for a common data and information system and for the publication of standards and guidelines applicable to most voluntary programs. The framework for increased cooperation is already in place through the Alliance for Volunteerism. Church Women United, an ecumenical body with 2,000 units in local communities and an early member of the Alliance, is in a position to facilitate connecting links among various religious groups and with secular agencies which serve volunteer training needs or maintain various voluntary action programs of national significance.

Finally, the whole area of leadership development is enjoying a well-deserved revival. Learning experiences are now designed to focus not only on attitudes of volunteers but on specific ways to improve their management, policy-making, and direct-service volunteering skills. Such training also includes a body of knowledge affecting the content area in which the volunteering takes place, so that training is not all method, but includes why various social systems are in difficulty. Many workshops are now planned jointly by local volunteers, local voluntary action groups, and national leadership. This joint planning is followed by joint management of the workshops.

Another promising approach is the move toward continuing education workshops on human resources for congregational leaders by seminaries and other religious-based groups. Iliff Seminary in Denver and the Lutheran Church of America are among the pioneering groups in this awakened interest in helping leaders improve the effectiveness of voluntary members in a voluntary faith community. The workshops center on the role of the leader as an enabler of the human resources within the congregation itself. They assist leaders in finding better ways of utilizing this person-power and in encouraging members to look upon their abilities and talents as resources for human development. From this point on, it is a logical step for congregational volunteers to apply the strength of their own human resources for the human development concerns of the larger community.