

Churches, Charity and Children
*How Religious Organizations Are Reaching
America's At-Risk Kids*

by Joseph Loconte and Lia Fantuzzo

“There is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his day, and if one has only one good memory left in one's heart, even that may sometimes be the means of saving us.”

— Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*

Children in Crisis

In the summer of 2001, the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society undertook a research study to learn more about community organizations serving at-risk and high-risk children. No one knows exactly how many of these children there are, but one study estimates a staggering 8.2 million nationwide.¹

These young people race through childhood at breakneck speed—without a map, a compass, or any real sense of the road to adulthood. Government offers them an array of social programs, including food stamps, housing subsidies, health care, and “crisis intervention” services. Yet their greatest need, their one howling desire, often goes unmet: the need to be loved. What they lack is “some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood.” Without that, their futures remain deeply uncertain.

¹ See “Children At Risk: State Trends 1990-2000,” a PRB/KIDS COUNT Special Report published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The report uses a family risk index based on four risk factors: 1) child lives in a family with income below the poverty line 2) child lives in a single-parent family 3) child lives in a family where no parent has full-time, year-round employment and 4) child lives with a household head who is a high school dropout. High-risk children live in families with three or more of the risk factors.

Though we identified scores of groups trying to improve the chances for these kids, three simple criteria were applied for taking a closer look. First, helping at-risk children succeed must be a major objective. Second, the organization must work in partnership with federal, state or local government. And third, the program must be considered faith-based. After examining about three dozen ministries, our main conclusion is this: Faith-based organizations are working closely with government to help needy children—while respecting church-state boundaries, protecting the rights of the people they serve, and preserving their own religious identity.

In debates over religion and public life, fears and hype easily harden into dogma. Many on the left claim that religious belief is irrelevant to programs helping the poor. Many on the right assume that any agreement with government is a pact with the Devil. What's needed is a better understanding of what actually happens in the trenches of social outreach, on both sides of the church-state line.

One thing is clear: These partnerships represent American-style citizenship at its best. None are the result of federal or even local government initiative; nearly all grew out of the concerns of private citizens who saw problems hardly anyone else was addressing. Though many of the organizations studied receive some government funding, most are supported privately and driven by volunteers. Nevertheless, government officials are often intimately involved in the work of faith-based organizations, from publicly endorsing their programs to personally assisting their staff.

Although our research sample was limited, its influence is significant. Combined, these groups are reaching over 23,000 at-risk youth. Various services are offered—including tutoring, job training, and day care—but the focus is on establishing

friendships. Some of these efforts are infrequent and very informal. Yet many kids are in mentoring relationships and appear to be spending regular time with a caring adult.

Whatever else may be said about the importance of religious charities, without them there would be no steady, loving influence in the lives of thousands of vulnerable children.

Lessons from the Frontlines

Much of the recent debate over President Bush's faith-based initiative has neglected these realities. Our research study underscored several features of church-state partnerships that offer important lessons for policymakers, government officials and ministry leaders:

First, religious approaches meet deep emotional needs in the lives of youth by building relationships of trust and love. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, one of the most important studies of America's youth, found that the active involvement of a caring adult is the best defense against delinquency, academic failure, substance abuse and other problems. "Children who report feeling connected to a parent," researchers concluded, "are protected against many different kinds of health risks."²

This fact is as an operating assumption of the organizations we examined. The special challenge they face is helping kids whose parents are unavailable or unable to offer much support. Aslan Youth Ministries in Redbank, N.J., for example, tutors about 275 public school children, most living in housing projects where single-parent homes are the norm. "Kids don't come to tutoring because they love reading and math," says executive director Craig Bogard. "They come because they want to be loved."

Though ministry leaders commonly cite faith commitment as the reason for their work, they emphasize the importance of “love in action” for children who’ve experienced many disappointments in life. “Many of the kids have been abused at the hands of those who’ve called themselves Christians,” says Mick Prandi, director of development at New Horizons Ministry in Seattle. “Our emphasis is on relationships, on loving them unconditionally.”

That’s not a flash-in-the-pan task. Government officials admit that many secular programs are short-lived; volunteers often lack commitment and drift in and out of the lives of vulnerable kids. Principal Glenda O’Banion says her school, Hammond Eastside Primary in Hammond, La., has attracted many volunteers because of its location in an extremely impoverished school district. But they never last long. For a while she stopped letting groups come in.

The ministry leaders with whom we spoke, however, have structured their activities to meet the problem. Kids Hope USA, a tutoring program based in Spring Lake, Mich., will not work with congregations that lack the resources to sustain long-term friendships. That includes hiring a staff person to manage volunteers and a pledge from the pastor to become a mentor. “I’m not interested in good intentions,” says executive director Virgil Gulker. “We put extraordinary emphasis on the commitment the church needs to make to the child.” It was enough to persuade O’Banion to allow Kids Hope USA volunteers into her school. “I’m an old lady and I’ve been in education for 30 years,” she says, “and I’ve never seen anything like this.”

² Robert Wm. Blum and Peggy Mann Rinehart, “Reducing the Risk: Connections That Make A Difference in the Lives of Youth,” Division of General Pediatrics & Adolescent Health, University of Minnesota. Based on data first published September 10, 1997 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Staff at CityCURE in Cincinnati, Ohio, make a four-year commitment to a child and his family. Friends of the Children in Portland, Ore., which targets first-graders considered most at risk, requires staff to sustain relationships for at least 10 years. “We believe in relentless effort. We will not allow kids to fail,” says national director Doug Stamm. “This is the same commitment Christ would give.”

Whether expressed in religious or secular terms, ministry leaders describe a tough-minded devotion to children: They are realistic about the problems facing youth, but determined to be involved enough in their lives to help overcome them. Often functioning as surrogate parents, they appear to be meeting deep emotional needs in children’s lives by building relationships of trust and support.³

Second, many religious organizations consider exposure to faith a crucial part of their effectiveness with youth. In the debate over the President’s faith-based initiative, many people are skeptical that religious perspectives are important in social welfare programs.⁴ Claims Mark Chavez, a sociologist at the University of Arizona: “It can’t be said strongly enough how little we know about whether religion makes a difference in the effectiveness of delivering services.”⁵

Not surprisingly, the faith-based organizations examined take a different view. The Harambee Christian Family Center runs an after-school tutoring program in high-crime neighborhoods in Pasadena, Calif. Staff and volunteers deliver a heavy dose of Bible instruction and tough-love mentoring. “We are living it out every day, changing

³ This is consistent with research conducted of the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America mentoring program by Public/Private Ventures. That study found that youth with mentors were less likely to start using alcohol or other drugs, improved their school attendance and performance. See J. Tierney, J. Grossman and N. Resch, “Making A Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters,” Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1995.

⁴ Benjamin Soskis, “Act of Faith: What Religion Cannot Do,” *The New Republic*, February 26, 2001.

⁵ Eyal Press, “Leas Us Not Into Temptation,” *The American Prospect*, April 9, 2001.

lives, building disciples and modeling Christ,” says associate director Rudy Carrasco. “You need something as strong as a gang to reach these kids.”

The Central Detroit Christian Development Corporation provides affordable housing, tutoring and other services to youth and their families living in the poorest zip code in the state of Michigan. In a public school targeted by the ministry, barely one in four students entering ninth grade every year will graduate. Failure is the defining feature of life for many of these kids—a problem that youth workers say will not be cured by secular self-esteem strategies. Hence, the organization’s creed: “Real change in a community starts with a heart change through a relationship with Jesus Christ.”

That theme was echoed in numerous conversations with ministry leaders, who stressed the chaotic family conditions engulfing at-risk youth. “We can’t always change their circumstances,” says Donna Speer, director of Families in Touch, a program for unwed teen moms in Waukegan, Ill. “But we can point them to a loving God who can give them the strength and peace to sustain them on the road to responsible adulthood.”

Youth workers commonly see enraged or depressed adolescents “acting out” because their fathers have abandoned them. How do you break the grip of resentment? Faith in God, they say, which leads to forgiveness. “Ninety-nine percent of the men are angry because they don’t have a father in the home,” says the Rev. Jesse Lee Peterson, founder of Brotherhood Organization of a New Destiny in Los Angeles. “This is the only way we can ever hope to guide young people.”

The President’s agenda has prompted an important argument over the importance of religious values to social programs. As the debate proceeds, it’s important to bear in mind the internal dynamic of many organizations serving youth: They consider exposure

to religious values and beliefs a crucial part of their strategy for helping needy kids—and structure their programs accordingly.

Third, many religious organizations insist on staff and volunteers who share their deepest beliefs and values. Perhaps the most contested aspect of the President’s faith-based initiative is whether groups receiving public funds may use religion as a criterion for hiring. Decades of civil rights legislation have given religious institutions special exemptions from anti-discrimination laws.⁶ Nonetheless, critics now assail these hiring protections as “federally-funded discrimination.” They see no reason why the staff of a faith-based charity should adhere to certain religious beliefs.⁷

The ministry leaders we interviewed disagree. Nearly every group considered the religious commitments of its employees either important or vital to its work. Most required staff to endorse a statement of faith, and many required it of volunteers.

Hope Now for Youth, in Fresno, Calif., is a typical example. The organization targets young men involved with gangs. Staff and volunteers hang out with kids in malls, neighborhoods, and pool halls. The aim is to build friendships and introduce them not only to good-paying jobs (they’ve placed about 700 youth in local businesses), but also to faith in Jesus. According to executive director Rev. Roger Minassian, it’s not a mission field for doubters: “We want these men to understand why we do what we do,” he says.

⁶ While banning acts of discrimination in employment based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion or national origin, the 1964 Civil Rights Act contains an exemption under Title VII for religious institutions. It states: “This subchapter shall not apply to... a religious corporation, association, educational institution, or society with respect to the employment of individuals of a particular religion to perform work connected with the carrying on by such corporation, association, educational institution, or society of its activities.” The exemption was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Corporation of Presiding Bishop v. Amos*, 483 US 327, 342-343 (1987).

⁷ See Nathan Diament, “A Slander Against Our Sacred Institutions,” *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2001. See also Elayl Press, “Faith-Based Discrimination: The Case of Alicia Pedreira,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 2001.

“The passion to serve other men comes from gratefulness to God.” All staff must share the organization’s Christian values and vision.

From the standpoint of youth ministers, it’s not hard to understand why this is important. Children desperately need positive role models, and faith commitment is a reliable engine of good character. “Kids are always watching,” explains Lisa Cromartie, director of Urban Youth Ministries in Holland, Mich. “You need to be living a life that is consistent with the ideas the ministry is teaching.” In addition, kids from troubled homes often require intense, sacrificial involvement—way beyond the 9 to 5 schedule of unionized social workers. Serve Our Youth, based in Des Moines, Iowa, for example, targets kids already in crisis mode: in shelters, detention centers and juvenile courts. Says development director Ann Herde: “I can’t imagine anyone who is not a Christian volunteering for this kind of work.”

Government officials say they want youth workers who are skilled, devoted and virtuous—and if religion is the source, so be it. In Philadelphia, criminal justice officials applaud the quality and commitment of volunteers from Amachi, a church-based mentoring program for the children of inmates. “I’m not a person of faith, but I’m very practical,” says Alan Appel, director of inmate services at the Philadelphia Prison System. “And from a practical standpoint, what’s missing in the lives of many of these children is the development of a value system....So the fact that these mentors come from a faith-based values system, to me, is terrific.”

Groups that serve at-risk youth focus on building relationships. They depend heavily on adult mentors who model good character, and most often they are people of

faith. It appears the overwhelming majority of faith-based organizations insist on staff and volunteers who share their religious beliefs and values.⁸

Fourth, religious organizations are careful to respect the beliefs of youth and their families. Though these organizations base employment decisions at least in part on religious belief, they make no such distinctions among the children they serve. Indeed, a notable feature of the groups examined is their willingness to assist people of all faith backgrounds—or none. They cast a very wide net.⁹

Nevertheless, a final concern about faith-based organizations is whether and how they engage in evangelistic activities. Critics of the President’s agenda claim that zealous groups will trample the freedoms of people in crisis. Consistent with previous research, our study shows that evangelism may take many forms, depending on an organization’s sense of mission; it can range from discussions about good character to explicit invitations to conversion.¹⁰ Wide diversity exists even in our small sample. Even organizations with plainly evangelistic goals, however, have learned to walk gingerly as they encourage youth to consider religious values and ideals.

The Chamblee-Doraville Ministry Center in Doraville, Ga., for example, aims to be “the living presence of Jesus” both by meeting practical needs and sharing the gospel. Ministering in an ethnically diverse section of metro Atlanta, the organization welcomes

⁸ Historically speaking, character-building organizations nearly always have been led by people drawn from religious communities. As author David Blankenhorn puts it: “The YMCA did not improve the lives of millions of young people and place its stamp upon the American character because its leaders believed in the ideal of guys playing basketball. It did not even achieve its remarkable (if historically short-lived) success because its leaders upheld a secular or purely civic ideal of character formation.” See Don Eberly, ed., *The Faith Factor in Fatherhood: Renewing the Sacred Vocation of Fathering* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 1999), xiii.

⁹ See Ram Cnaan, “Keeping Faith in the City: How 401 Urban Religious Congregations Serve Their Neediest Neighbors,” University of Pennsylvania Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, 2000-1.

¹⁰ See Ronald J. Sider and Heidi Rolland Unruh, “Evangelism and Church-State Partnerships,” *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 43, Spring 2001.

people of all faith backgrounds—including Muslims, Buddhists and agnostics. Says Rev. Lanny Reich: “We are respectful of where they are coming from.”

Likewise, the religious mission of Serve Our Youth is pretty muscular: “To see Jesus Christ transform the lives of juvenile offenders.” Yet the organization carefully instructs staff and volunteers in rules about evangelism. Staff don’t raise religious questions with youth, but may answer questions as they come up. “We make it clear that there’s a fine line between mentoring out of faith commitment and proselytizing,” explains development director Ann Heerde. “And if they cross that line, it’s all over.”

To be sure, in some organizations rules about evangelism are undefined; it’s not always clear whether lines are ever crossed. Nevertheless, most ministry leaders appear to know the limits: Always get parental permission before contacting children or inviting them to church; let parents know if church-sponsored events involve religious activities; allow youth to ask questions about faith as a natural outgrowth of friendship; don’t spend public money on religious activities; and don’t evangelize in public classrooms.¹¹

Government officials with whom we spoke seem satisfied that these guidelines were being followed. Even organizations with strongly articulated religious beliefs or an openly evangelistic mission respect the beliefs of the youth and families they serve.

Making Room for Faith

Whatever direction the President’s faith-based agenda takes, the national debate over the ability of religion to overcome social ills will continue. At stake are not only constitutional issues, but the integrity of America’s religious institutions. All the more

reason for policy-makers to get their facts right. Some of the arguments against allowing religious groups a wider role in helping the poor reveal an astonishing ignorance of what these ministries actually do. Al McGeehan, mayor of Holland, Mich., puts it bluntly: “If people don’t understand the positive linkage between faith-based organizations and city hall, they’re not living in the real world.” Most Americans seem to understand the connection. According to a recent Gallup Poll, nearly 70 percent of those surveyed believe religious organizations do the best job of helping youth in the community.¹²

All of this raises critical questions for policy-makers: If faith-based organizations fulfill an important public good, do they deserve public support? If they consider evangelism a crucial part of their work, does it merit First Amendment protection? If they depend on staff who share their religious values, should government uphold their hiring rights against policies that would undermine them?

The question of religion’s place in society has become so politicized that it’s easy to neglect the remarkable resources of America’s faith communities. Conversations with people on the frontlines of ministry help us to remember. “All the research I’ve done suggests that the value-added of the church relates to its willingness and capacity to love and form relationships with neighbors,” says Virgil Gulker, executive director of Kids Hope USA. “Short of that, I don’t think the church has a reason for being.”

As Dostoevsky suggests, there is nothing higher and stronger in human experience than the “good, sacred memories” that are the gift of such labor. With this truth in mind, there must be ways for church and state to work more closely together for

¹¹ The Supreme Court ruling in the *Good News Club v. Milford* (2001), by allowing a Bible club to offer religious activities in a public grade school, apparently makes evangelistic activities permissible in public classrooms—provided they are voluntary, receive no state support, and are approved by parents.

¹² “Americans Say Youth Should Be Top Priority,” America’s Promise news release, April 3, 2001.

the sake of America's neediest children. For them, experiences of faith, hope and love are hard to come by—yet will matter supremely. “If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his day.”

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