

Being Better Together

Forging Partnerships Between Agencies and Religious Organizations

By Marlene Wilson

There is a saying, "the time is ripe," and that describes both the opportunity and the necessity for forging new and innovative partnerships between agencies and religious groups. The needs facing our communities as we move toward the new century are so daunting that it will take the best skills and commitment of volunteers and staff from all segments of society to be able to meet them. Learning to build collaborative partnerships will soon become one of the most vital skills for today's leaders. In my opinion, it will make the difference between going out of business, surviving or thriving.

Over the past 25 years I have spent approximately one-half of my training and consulting time with nonprofit and governmental organizations and the other half working with a wide variety of religious organizations. During that time, I have thought a great deal about how to bring about closer collaboration between them. Here are some of my observations and suggestions.

I have found that many people within religious groups are looking for significant ways to put their faith into action, but often do not know how to plug into community groups. The theme of putting beliefs into action seems to exist throughout most of the world's religions.

■ "As I view it, life is not divided into neat, separate categories of belief and action. The test of belief is action and the motivation of action is belief ... Belief unaccompanied by action is sterile."—Israel Goldstein, one of the founders of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

■ "Faith in action is love and love in action is service and proof of service is peace."—Mother Theresa

■ "For the seeker of truth, there are certain beliefs

that must accompany every action: One should act without selfishness, cultivate compassion for all living things and develop respect for others. I believe all religions carry the same message despite their differences in philosophy."

—The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet

The challenge before agencies is to find more effective ways to connect this powerful faith motivation with a wider variety of meaningful opportunities for service in the community.

The religious community has sometimes been referred to as a sleeping giant that needs to be awakened. The term giant is appropriate, for it is the largest group of potential volunteers in the world. It therefore could become one of our most powerful partners in meeting community needs. The need to be awakened refers to the fact that surveys indicate between 70 percent to 80 percent of people who claim church membership in this country are in no way involved in their congregation or parish except for occasional attendance. Many of them are involved as individuals, however, in community volunteer work.

When I wrote the book, *How to Mobilize Church Volunteers*, I learned from religious leaders that this phenomenon of the pillars (20 percent who do everything) and the pew-sitters (the 80 percent who watch) was one of the major reasons they were reluctant to recruit volunteers for community needs. They needed them also. Interestingly, the reasons given by the uninvolved majority all relate to the fact that most religious organizations have had no formal system of volunteer management in place. They rarely have



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written job descriptions for volunteer opportunities; utilize poor recruitment methods; fail to follow-up on time and talent surveys and rarely interview members to discover their interests, talents and concerns.

As a result of these findings, a number of us have focused a great deal of effort on teaching volunteer management systems and techniques to religious groups. The results are encouraging. There are now several hundred directors of volunteers within religious organizations.

They go by many titles, and it has become one of the fastest growing professions in the religious community. This is good news for community agencies, for they now have a direct liaison within these groups to help recruit needed volunteers. But much still needs to be done. Here are some suggestions for community agencies:

- Have sound volunteer management systems in place yourself before trying to recruit these groups.

- Put all religious organizations in your community on the Volunteer Center and DOVIA's mailing lists, especially for training events. Many eagerly respond when invited.

Directors of volunteers who are members of a religious community can offer great service by being a catalyst or consultant to help them start a volunteer or lay ministries program there. Share your valuable expertise and they will be better equipped to share their members with the community. When approaching a religious organization with your agency's need for volunteers: Find out if any of your present volunteers are members of that group and ask them to help you tell your story.

- Be specific about your needs and how members who volunteer can help your clients.

- Be creative in your appeal, using slides, videos, client interviews and current volunteers.

- Write short, snappy and specific descriptions of your needs that can be easily inserted in bulletins, newsletters, and in their directories of congregational volunteer opportunities.

- Ask for time with the appropriate committee within that religious group, depending on their structure and your need.

These are a few suggestions that will help

churches and synagogues work more effectively with community agencies. But this is only a first step. There are much larger community issues that need to be addressed together such as homelessness, hunger, day care, violence, medical care for the uninsured. These are needs

that call for a new kind of collaborative effort, and we cannot afford to overlook the enormous potential that religious organizations can and do bring to these partnerships. Some outstanding examples of this are Habitat for Humanity, Inter-Faith Volunteer Caregivers Programs and the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C.'s Jubilee Housing Projects.

One of the challenges to collaborative partnerships in communities is that agencies in the past have had a disturbing history of competition and turf protection in providing services. This has led to gaps and overlaps in services, and clients have suffered because of it. Today we are all being called to a different mode of operation and that is collaboration versus competition. Needs are increasing, at the same time that resources are decreasing at alarming rates. Therefore, we no longer have the luxury of competing—we must learn to work together. ■

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Tips for Building Partnerships

I would like to share eight keys to building collaborative partnerships. These must have as their foundation three critical factors: truth, trust and clear expectations.

■ Focus on mission.

This needs to be a compelling vision that will motivate the members of the team to commitment and action. Orlando, Florida, has brought a collaborative partnership of all segments of the community together with the mission: "To make our community the best possible place to raise a child." Silicon Valley, California, has adopted

the mission: "To make our community the healthiest region in California by 2000 ... and the healthiest in the nation by 2010." These are examples of missions that unite all segments of a community. Partnerships form when the cause is compelling.

■ Determine clear objectives and action plans together. This moves the mission into clear and measurable actions. Here is where collaboration starts or stops. People become committed to plans they help make, so be careful that the leaders plan *with* not *for* the members of the team.

■ Participative empowering leadership is essential. Autocratic leaders who make all the decisions and tell others what to do cannot facilitate collaboration. Max DePree, in his powerful book, *Leadership is an Art*, states: "The art of leadership is liberating people to do what is required of them in the most effective and humane way possible. ... It begins with a belief in the potential of people. Participative management without a belief in that potential and without conviction about gifts people bring to organizations is a contradiction in terms."

■ Determine, develop and utilize the strengths and skills of all the team members. The goal is to maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses. Community agencies and religious groups will bring different resources, strengths



and capabilities. That is precisely why we need each other.

■ Develop creative problem-solving, conflict-management and decision-making skills. There will be disagreements about priorities, timing or process. Those can be negotiated and resolved with skillful leadership, as long as all are committed to the stated mission.

■ Encourage creativity and risk. Communities are fully aware that we desperately need some new solutions. It will require collaborative partnerships to create and risk new approaches.

DePree shares a bit of wisdom here also: "We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are."

■ Evaluate the work of the partnership frequently, honestly and objectively. It is necessary to know both "well done's" and "opportunities to improve."

■ Create and maintain a healthy climate. Collaborative teams value, respect and appreciate one another. All members know why the team is together, understand their own roles and responsibilities and feel a sense of pride and purpose in being a part of something greater than themselves.

There are hundreds of examples of successful collaborative partnerships between religious groups and community agencies already in existence. Many of them are described in the book, *Volunteers in Action*, by Brian and Ann Brown O'Connell. These examples can serve as models for such programs in your community.

To summarize what collaborative teams can and should be like, I would like to share this quote from *How Can I Help?* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman: "The reward, the real grace of conscious service is the opportunity not only to help relieve suffering but to grow in wisdom, experience greater unity and have a good time while we're doing it."

—Marlene Wilson ■