

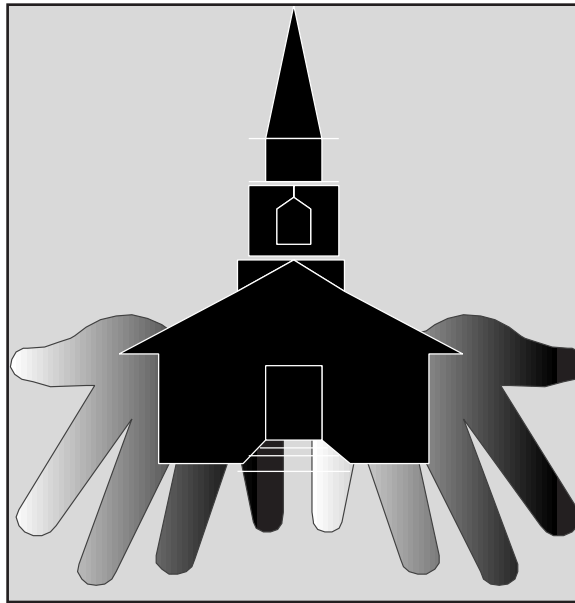
# SOCIAL POLICY GETS RELIGION

DAVID DODENHOFF

One of history's greatest social activists, once thought retired, has in fact been working quietly in big cities and small towns, in rehab clinics, job centers, homeless shelters, prisons, and group homes. Where lives have been turned upside down by poverty, drug addiction, divorce, illegitimacy, crime, and abuse, he is there, helping to set things right. He is not one to trumpet his good deeds or to seek recognition. Even so, the leading presidential contenders of both parties have praised his work, promising to give their support the force of law if elected. The ministers, community volunteers, social workers, and politicians who have seen him in action say that he can work miracles. And the disadvantaged, to whom he offers hope for a better life, openly worship him.

His name? Jesus Christ. Perhaps you've heard of him.

Just as "the environment" seeped into popular consciousness and mainstream political discourse a decade ago, "faith-based" is a phrase becoming increasingly recognizable to the public and increasingly common in the political argot. What does "faith-based" mean?



Faith-based social programs rely heavily — though not necessarily exclusively — on the power of religious faith and practice to transform individual lives. They treat the presence of God in the daily life of the disadvantaged as far more important to their ultimate lawfulness, success, self-sufficiency, and happiness than job training, after-school programs, anger-management classes, and

heaven help us, midnight basketball.

Faith-based programs lie on the downward slope of a remarkable arc in American social policy. In the 1960s, policymakers believed that the accumulated wisdom of social science, coupled with the spending power and administrative might of the federal government, could vanquish poverty, crime, unemployment, welfare dependency, and homelessness. They were wrong — dramatically so. Though this failure soured the public on grand gestures in social policy, heavy federal spending on existing programs continued through the mid-1970s. By the late 1970s, however, deficits, stagflation, and a conservative

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mood in the country ultimately slowed the flow of federal dollars to non-entitlement social programs.

The early 1980s saw the arrival of a new kind of social welfare policy — experimentation on a budget. Large federal budget deficits, conservative political administrations, and a lingering distaste for sweeping reform meant that the federal government would no longer be the locus of radical changes in social policy, nor a cash spigot funding utopian dreams. Instead, in exchange for lower budgets and program evaluation requirements, states and localities were given freedom to experiment — through block grants with reduced federal regulation, through the granting of waivers to states to try out innovations in welfare policy, and through statutory changes in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program.

As the federal government relinquished control over social programs to lower levels of government, research began to show that many of the state and local experiments were working (though often in very modest ways). This was no surprise to conservatives, who had long held that the closer government is to the people, the better it works. Conservatives also believed, however, that individuals, families, churches, community-based organizations, and volunteers could be more effective than government at any level. Christian conservatives in particular, and elected Republicans with strong Christian conservative backing, began pointing to the successful efforts of private, faith-based groups that seemed to bring real change to individuals, families, and neighborhoods without costing taxpayers a dime.

After 1992, with a Democratic administration in the White House and Democratic control of Congress, the successes of faith-based groups drew mostly yawns inside the Beltway. Until 1994, that is. Republican control of Congress changed the debate dramatically. The most important piece of social policy of the last 30 years — the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of

1996 (federal welfare reform) — contained a provision authorizing private-sector, faith-based organizations to act as administrators of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. By enacting this change, Republicans in Congress stood sixties-style social policy thinking on its head. Where once the federal government had turned to Harvard Ph.D.s for policy advice, now they would turn to inner-city ministers. Where once the feds had slopped porcine, left-leaning non-profits in the name of social engineering, now they would support lean and hungry socially conservative organizations with skinny budgets, wary of bureaucrats bearing cash. Where once the policy elite had erected a Berlin Wall between church and state, now they would tear down the concrete, steel, and razor wire, invite the faithful into the public square, and ask for their help.

Faith-based programs had arrived.

### **Faith and Homelessness in Milwaukee**

Just how do faith-based programs work, and how well? Consider the example of the Joy House, a faith-based homeless shelter for mothers and their children in Milwaukee. In the fall of 1997, under the sponsorship of Milwaukee's Center for Self-Sufficiency, the Rev. Susan Vergeront and I began a longitudinal study of homeless women who had taken refuge at the Joy House. We interviewed 62 adult Joy House residents upon their arrival at the shelter. The interviews consisted of a series of questions about the respondents' background, their path to homelessness and the changes it had brought about in them, their plans for the future, and the place of religious faith in their lives. We then checked on the progress of as many of our respondents as we could find at three months (34) and at six months (36), asking many of the same questions we had asked in our initial interview.

One of our main interests in the study was to see what role, if any, religious faith would play in sustaining homeless mothers with children in their time of crisis, and in helping them get back on their feet. The Joy House, after all, was not just a place for the destitute to escape

Milwaukee's freezing winters. Instead, Joy House staff actively sought to help residents return to normalcy. They did this in part through traditional secular approaches — computer classes, resume development, help with child care and transportation, mock interviews, assistance in securing grants and loans, etc. But they also did this through religious instruction. The Joy House offered morning devotions in which residents read Bible verses related to the struggles in their personal life, and talked about how God could help them find peace in the middle of chaos. There were also mandatory evening Bible studies that consisted of hymns, discussion, Bible reading, and some good, old-fashioned preaching. One-on-one religious counseling was also available to residents.

This was proselytizing with a purpose. The point was not merely to teach the Bible, Jesus, and Christian faith, but to relate these concepts to the residents' struggle. Joy House residents, many of whom could not be blamed for thinking themselves worthless, were taught about their value in God's eyes. They were taught that God had put them on Earth for a purpose, and that that purpose was not to wallow in self-pity. They were taught about a powerful force greater than themselves, working on their behalf if only they would ask. They were taught to forgive themselves and others for the wrongs in their past. They were taught that a life lived according to Christian principles could be their path out of misery.

And was it? The ideal way to answer that question would be through a traditional experimental design. A treatment group and control group, chosen at random, would be assigned to a faith-based and non-faith-based shelter, respectively. Each group would then be studied at regular intervals to determine which had more successfully made its way out of homelessness and back to a stable life, at least temporarily.

Unfortunately, we did not have the luxury of this kind of design. In our three rounds of interviews, however, we asked Joy House residents a number of questions about the place of Christian faith in their lives, and in their struggle with homelessness. Among the questions we asked was the following: "How important has your faith been to you in dealing with your current situation?"

During our first round of interviews at the shelter, 21 of our 62 respondents (34%) told us their faith was "important" or "very important" to them in dealing with homelessness. An additional 22 (35%) said their faith had been a "help" or "comfort" to them during their time of crisis. Six others (10%) said their faith had "grown stronger" while at the shelter. The remaining 21% of respondents were divided among those whose answers were uncategorizable (13%), those who said their faith was "sort of" or "somewhat" important (3%), and those who said their faith was "not very important" or of "low importance" (5%).

These numbers are interesting, but the testimonials of respondents are far more so:

- My faith has been the one thing that has helped me preserve my sanity. I used to depend on people, and then the friends would leave. I used to depend on family, but they left, too. I used to depend on my man, but he left me over and over again. I know God is the only thing I can always depend on.
- My faith has been extremely important in getting me through this. I was facing death — I still am in a way — and I feel God lifting me and carrying me through this. I am not as afraid as I first was.

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- Since being in the (shelter), I pray all day long. I thank God for protecting me and my children, and that I haven't gone crazy or turned to drugs. My faith is the mainstay of my life here.
- (My faith has) taught me to be a different person. I was a drinker. I was abusive. I neglected my kids. I spent money on booze and other stuff that I should have spent on my kids. I'm trying to do better now. I'm not saying I'm saved, but I'm trying to do better.
- My faith is my rock while I am here. Everything I do, I pray first. "Lord, I know you will make a way." I claim His protection and His will. If it's not God's will, it's not going to happen.
- (My faith) has been very much a comfort to me here. I am frightened for my son and his future, but I know God is with me and will help me work things out.
- My faith helped a lot in dealing with being homeless, for me and my son. It helped us realize God is always there to turn to. We realize that not all prayers are answered right away, but that God does have a plan.
- My faith has really helped me here. I can see my faith keeping me calm and not getting so angry at others. It has helped a lot with self control. I stop and I think, "What would Jesus do?" when I am tempted to get angry or frustrated.
- Since being here, my faith has helped sustain me. It has become a priority. It has helped me to not worry so much. I take things one step at a time, day by day.
- You may not believe this, but I am going to be honest. I do not feel homeless. I don't feel bad. God is really taking care of me here. The kids are doing fine, too.
- I didn't think there was any hope for me (before coming to the shelter). Now I know there is. Hope for standing on my own, with God's help. Hope for goodness with my children.
- God has been here during this. He helped me find a job, he helped me find child care, he's kept my kids happy and in school, he's provided me with stability. My kids are happy here. I pray every night, and every day too. I know I can get done what I need to get done, with God's help.

These responses suggest the essence of the faith-based approach — God and religious faith transforming lives in ways that job training, drug rehabilitation, shelter, a change of clothes, and bus fare simply cannot. Faith appears to be playing a role both in changing destructive behaviors and in giving a sense of self-worth and hope to those who desperately need it.

We would like to be able to say that the faith to which these respondents attest increases their probability of escaping homelessness, finding a job, and achieving stability and self-sufficiency. Unfortunately, our study was not designed to test that proposition. We can, however, rule out some hypotheses that would tend to undermine the potential importance of faith.

First, one might argue that these respondents were strong believers *before* coming to the shelter — in fact, that that is why they chose a faith-based shelter — and the shelter, therefore, did not enhance their Christian commitment. In our initial interview, however, we asked our respondents how important their faith had been to them prior to coming to the shelter. In our follow-up interviews at three and six months, we asked how important their faith was at present. In the initial interview, only 34% of respondents told us their faith was "important" or "very important" to them. In the three-month and six-month interviews, 85% and 81%, respectively, declared their faith "important" or "very important." Conversely, in the initial interview, 26% of respondents declared their faith not very important. At three and six months, this number had fallen to three percent. There is every indication, then, that time spent at the shelter strengthened our respondents' Christian faith, and that the faith they expressed to us while at the shel-

ter was not merely a carry-over from their lives before homelessness.

Second, one might argue that whatever the putative benefits of religious belief, faith in God is likely to wane once respondents leave the shelter and daily religious instruction is no longer a part of their life. Ninety-five percent of our respondents had left the shelter in fewer than three months, however. If their faith were going to wane, it should have started to do so at three months, and certainly would have done so by six months. As noted above, however, our respondents' faith remained strong at three and six months, and substantially stronger than it had been before they came to the shelter.

## **Conclusion**

There are thousands of institutions like the Joy House all over the country, quietly and effectively doing the Lord's work. They were there in the 1960s, too, but they were no match for the hubris of social scientists and their misplaced confidence in purely secular policy approaches. With their programs having shown disappointing results, policymakers in the 1990s have finally come to Jesus. They are now turning to faith-based institutions to solve the same problems they took on 30 years ago, this time, however, putting their faith in God rather than the professors. To that one can only say, Amen.