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Some Positive Benefits Churches Bring to Communities

by Andy Lewis

The American founders viewed churches as a central institution within American life, because religion provided the moral foundation of self-restraint and community awareness necessary for the success of republican self-government. Many believed that the American experiment would not succeed without the moral training churches provided to citizens. Churches, surely, have contributed to the success of America by encouraging virtue, but social science research has also shown that churches provide direct and indirect economic and social benefits to communities. Churches provide valuable contributions to communities in the areas of direct economic contributions, social services and community volunteering, education and civic skills training, and reduced levels of deviance.

These benefits positively improve communities in direct and indirect manners, and they enhance political stability and the long-term health of communities. This paper will outline some examples of each cited by prominent social science researchers, developing the argument that churches bring benefits to communities that outweigh the loss of revenue from their tax exempt status. In fact, if it were not for churches, government would have to expend public funds to replace the community benefits that churches provide. Overall it is clear that churches bring positive benefits to communities, and their role in the community as a beneficial, nonprofit institution should be maintained.

CHURCHES PROVIDE DIRECT ECONOMIC BENEFITS

The presence of churches in the community brings direct economic benefits to the local area. Church organizations provide jobs for the community, and churches support a variety of local businesses. Churches bring individuals from surrounding

areas to the community where the church is located, and these individuals provide economic support to local establishments. Thus, churches aid in bringing additional revenue communities.

Churches are also an attractive component to local communities. Much like strong school systems, many families and individuals consider the presence of local religious organizations when making decisions about moving to communities and purchasing property. The presence of churches aids in families choosing to establish residence in a local community. This, in turn, helps support local businesses and contributes to property tax payments. Therefore, churches provide direct economic benefits to the community. Churches encourage community growth, job creation, and overall economic vitality.

CHURCHES PROVIDE SOCIAL BENEFITS

Beyond direct economic benefits, churches also provide social benefits that have economic value. Several researchers have identified the social benefits that churches bring to communities, including: providing help to poor and vulnerable individuals in the community, improving marriage relationships, decreasing violence among women, increasing moral community obligations, and promoting charitable contributions and volunteering. Social scientists consider it irrational to participate in moral and volunteer projects, because they have such a low personal benefit. However, being a member of a religious community increases one's duty to serve others in the community, countering the "free rider" problem. Churches help communities complete vitally important social projects, for which the government would need to fund if churches did not provide such support.

A comprehensive study of religious congregations in six metropolitan communities found that 91 percent of religious congregations provided at least one social service (Cnaan et al. 1999), and, similarly, 87 percent of the congregations in a Philadelphia survey provided at least one social service to the community (Boddie et al. 2001). While some argue that this percentage of churches is overestimated because it overlooks smaller churches, even conservative estimates claim that larger congregations, representing approximately 75 percent of the religious population in America, provide at least one social service to the community (Chaves 1999).

In a recent, detailed study of churches in Philadelphia, researchers found that

churches do much more community aiding work, including helping the poor and making positive social inroads in the community, than previously realized by scholars. The authors declare, “If it were not for the impressive collective effort of some 2,120 local religious congregations, life in Philadelphia would have become extremely harsh” (Cnaan et al. 2006; p. 291). In a similar study in Philadelphia, congregations, on average, provided 2.33 different social programs (Boddie et al 2001). Another study shows that a typical church provides financial support, volunteers, space, and in-kind donations to six community programs each year (Ammerman 2001). In categorizing these community programs, Ammerman finds that congregations, on average, aid two direct service programs, two educational, health, or cultural programs, and one community development or political/social advocacy program (Ammerman 2001).

The presence of churches in the community will also increase the religiosity of locals, and increased religiosity results in positive social contributions for the community. For example, religiosity influences individuals’ obligations to perform non-religious moral acts. Individuals who are religious have been shown to have increased propensity to participate in community-building, moral projects, such as giving blood (Ortberg, Goruch, and Kim 2001). Additionally, church affiliation and religiosity increase community volunteering as well as intra-church volunteering (Park and Smith 2000). One scholar finds that churches contribute volunteers to three organizations on average, though some churches provide dozens of volunteers to different projects (Ammerman 2001). A 1990 national study finds that church members volunteer 56 million hours each year to organizations outside their local congregations, aiding with human service projects, educational attainment, cultural awareness and training, and environmental improvement (Hodgkinson 1990).

Because it can be difficult to quantify the exact value of the volunteering and community building benefits churches provide to local areas, many scholars have sought to quantify the “replacement value” of the social and volunteering benefits that churches provide to communities. The replacement value calculates monetary donations and in-kind support, staff and congregant volunteer hours, utilities, and the value of space (Tirrito and Cascio 2003). Cnaan valued that churches in large metropolitan communities provide support equal to one full-time social service employee (Cnaan 1999), and in a comprehensive study of Philadelphia scholars valued community services at \$115,009 per congregation and \$230,018,400 for all the

religious congregations in the city (Boddie, et al. 2001). The accuracy of this figure can be debated, but it is clear that by building up and sending out volunteers to the community, churches provide significant economic and social benefits, helping improve communities.

CHURCHES PROVIDE SOCIAL BENEFITS

Along with creating social programs and serving as a foundation for community volunteers, churches also improve the educational success of students and provide training and skills that promote civic engagement. For students, religious involvement is positively correlated with higher math and reading scores and greater educational aspirations (Regnerus 2000; Regnerus 2001). Students who frequently attend church have improved ability to allocate time and achieve goals (Freeman 1985), and religiously connected students are five times less likely than their peers to skip school (Sloane and Potvin 1986). Parents' involvement in churches also improves their children's educational capacities and achievements. Parents with higher levels of religiosity raise children who more consistently complete homework, attend class, and complete degree programs (Muller and Ellison 2001). Churches provide educational, psychological, and moral training and resources, which result in positive present and future educational outcomes for students.

Several cross-national and community based studies also show that churches help members obtain civic skills, such as public speaking, networking, organizing, and participating in politics (Schwadel 2002). The church environment provides a training ground for individuals from all socioeconomic backgrounds, affording individuals the skills to succeed in industry, business, education, and politics. In sum, the education and civic engagement training and motivation that church institutions foster has great social and economic benefits to societies. As education and civic engagement increase, deviance and crime decrease and economic growth and political stability increase. Churches are important institutions in the development of educational, life, and social skills necessary to succeed in society.

CHURCHES HELP DECREASE CRIME AND DEVIANCE

In addition to providing social programs and community volunteers, churches decrease the occurrence of crime and deviance in communities and among local

youth. Reduced levels of crime and deviance make communities more safe, stable, and productive, and safe and stable communities encourage economic growth, through business expansion and attracting new residents. Several studies find that churches decrease crime and deviance, helping promote these economic benefits of a safer community.

Being involved in a church consistently decreases levels of deviance and crime. Religious involvement decreases domestic violence among both men and women, according to a national study (Ellison and Anderson 2001). Church attendance has also been associated with decreased levels of assault, burglary, and larceny (Bainbridge 1989), and religiosity promotes decreased levels of violent crime both at the individual and the state level (Hummer, et al. 1999; Lester 1987). Increased levels of religiosity also directly decrease deviant behavior, such as drug use, violence, and delinquency among at risk youth (Fagan 2006). Decreased levels of deviance aid in bringing about social order, increase the likelihood that businesses will expand into local areas and bring economic opportunities, and decrease government expenditures into programs and institutions that reduce, punish, and compensate for deviance.

CHURCHES PROMOTE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Churches also promote a variety of health benefits for the community, improving the vitality of the community and decreasing government expenditures. Studies have consistently shown that religiosity is related to increased longevity (Johnson, et al. 2002; Fagan 2006). The average religious individual lives seven years longer than the average nonreligious individual, and this increases to fourteen years for African American individuals (Hummer, et al 1999; Fagan 2006). Research by Johns Hopkins scholars shows that nonreligious individuals have increased risks of dying from cirrhosis of the liver, emphysema, arteriosclerosis, cardiovascular diseases, and suicide (Comstock and Patridge 1972; Fagan 2006). Religious attendance has also been shown to decrease alcohol abuse and drug use (Fagan 2006; Gartner, et al. 1991; Hasin, et al. 1985). A study in San Diego, California also shows that nearly two-thirds of all churches provide health promotion programs and participate in community health programs (Elder, et al. 1989). Church programs and religious practices promote physical health, and a healthy community is more productive and less of a strain on local resources. By helping improve physical health, churches provide a significant benefit to the community.

In addition to physical health, church attendance also promotes mental health. In a comprehensive survey of mental health studies, 81 percent of 91 studies showed that religion is positively associated with mental well-being (Johnson, et al. 2002; Fagan 2006). Religious attendance has been shown to decrease stress, increase self esteem, and give individuals hope and a greater sense of life purpose (Fagan 2006; Johnson, et al. 2002). Increased religious practice also is associated with decreased levels of depression and suicide (Johnson, et al. 2002; Ellison 1995). In sum, church involvement has been shown to improve mental health, and having strong mental health makes individuals more productive and less at risk for committing crimes. Churches provide mental health benefits to individuals, and improved mental health directly aids communities.

CONCLUSION: CHURCHES PROMOTE OUTCOMES THAT IMPROVE GOVERNMENT STABILITY AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Community contributions such as volunteerism, mental and physical health, reduced deviance, increased education and civic awareness, and social networks are all components of social capital—a concept numerous social science researchers have identified as having a significant impact on successful communities and societies (Putnam 2000). Social capital is the outcome of trust, social networks, and social health, and it encourages economic and social opportunities for communities. Scholars have frequently referenced the role of religion in creating social capital and developing the positive societal impacts of social capital (Fukuyama 2001). Social capital, which churches promote, has been shown to increase economic growth (Zak and Knack 2001), and it also improves government performance, according to an evaluation of the fifty states (Knack 2002).

In total, Churches have diverse positive impacts on communities, ranging from increased trust, improved mental and physical health, decreased crime, and enhanced levels of volunteering and community outreach. These attributes build norms and values that encourage political stability and economic performance. Churches contribute to vitally important components of successful societies, and their presence in communities provides many benefits that cannot be measured solely by direct revenue.

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