

Where is the Faith?

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Abstract

This article comments on the importance and the absence of the faith community within the profession of volunteer resource management. Additionally, it explores reasons for this occurrence and advocates for the inclusion of the faith community in the dialogue and leadership of our profession.

Key Words:

church, engagement, faith, profession

When I was young, the children in my neighborhood used to play a game called chase, a group form of hide and seek. The structure of the game was for kids to break into two groups, where one group of children would search for and capture members of the other group of children. As kids were caught, they would switch to the capturing team and then help find the other children until everyone was on the same team. For the kids, this was a summer delight. They were able to explore their neighborhood, work together to achieve a goal, and eventually everyone ended up on the same team celebrating all the fun had.

There seem to be many corollaries between this game and the advancement of our volunteer resource management profession. Just like we had fun as children, most individuals and organizations in this field are passionate about volunteer engagement and enjoy their work. Even after moving from this profession, many continue their passion of volunteering and service. Just as we as kids explored our neighborhood and worked together, local professional associations have formed to

provide support to volunteer resource managers and provide a place for professionals to determine the direction of volunteer engagement in communities. One of the results is that through these networks, professional volunteer resource managers (VRMs) in need have found other likeminded peers who are able to offer help and advice. However, there seems to be one difference between this game and our profession. By the end of the game all the children end up on the same team. Unfortunately, as we continue to see our profession grow, change, and develop it does not seem as though all voices are present to inform and guide the discussion as to our future.

As our profession is discussed and when initiatives are planned, we see the representation of governments, non-profits, corporations, and academics. Each of these groups has VRMs who, as experts, act on their behalf promoting and protecting the interests of their representative groups. The intended result is that through such collaboration, understanding of others' needs occur, mutually beneficial solutions

are found, and the profession grows stronger. Yet, the faith community is largely missing in the discussion and leadership of our profession.

Before going further, let us be clear. This statement is not discounting the presence of faith-based volunteer organizations that work on behalf of houses of worship such as Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, the Jewish Federation, or the organizations supported by the Islamic Social Services Association. They are doing great work and their VRMs are represented professionally. Also, the observation is not intended to minimize the volunteer efforts of churches, mosques, and synagogues. Many organizations and communities rely heavily upon the people power of their adherents. Without them, the provision of social services, community programs, and spiritual ministry would disappear leaving many hurting people without recourse. But it is for this very reason the concern is raised regarding the absence of professional volunteer engagement by houses of worship. Where is their contribution in the leadership of and the participation in the larger discussion of the field of volunteer resource management?

Houses of faith have had an important historical impact on our country. Before others, houses of faith mobilized people to meet the needs of the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned. They were active participants organizing individuals to abolish slavery, promote suffrage, institute prohibition, and champion civil rights. No matter a person's religious inclinations or political leanings, houses of worship have been actively involved in shaping our country through the organizing, training, and supervision of volunteers.

Today's houses of faith continue to have an impact in our society and on volunteerism. In America today there are more than 250,000 houses of worship,

millions of adherents, and countless internal and external programs that require volunteers. Yet in professional circles it seems that this segment of volunteer resource management is missing from the larger dialogue.

As I have contemplated this situation, my first reaction was to assume that, given the size of many houses of worship, they may not have individuals who formally manage volunteers as paid professionals. This issue of size could explain their lack of presence in the leadership of our profession locally, regionally, and nationally. However, I am aware of church volunteer management associations that meet and work much like local DOVIAs (Directors of Volunteers In Agencies). So to see what form of professional support there was, I conducted a quick Google search. Based upon the search findings, it became evidently clear that houses of worship are not absent from our profession. There are millions of pages of information and thousands of resources all advising and directing houses of worship on how to manage volunteers. Yet, this dialogue by churches, mosques, and synagogues often does not engage the secular, but rather they rely upon one another.

This disengagement raises the question, "Why are they not involved with the rest of us?" It would be easy to point fingers and consider what is wrong with them for not being involved with us and participating in our profession as a whole. Yet is the responsibility of seeking out and engaging us actually theirs? In returning to the analogy of the game at the beginning of this article, it would seem that the responsibility rests with those that are seeking and aware to find those that are absent. In short, it is our responsibility to reach out to the houses of faith. Of course, this assumes that we need and want their

participation. Given the historical contribution of houses of worship, the number of volunteers they represent, and the tenet that inclusion of diversity is better than exclusion; we should accept such an assumption. So the question now is, “Why are we not actively involving houses of worship in the leadership of our profession?”

There are many reasons why, individually, this has not occurred. However, it seems there are two primary issues that may be impacting this lack of involvement. First, with the secularization of the United States there are natural tensions put upon relationships between houses of worship and non-faith based organizations. There seems to be a concern that due to the motivations of proselytization and evangelism it is not possible to find common ground with houses of worship. Connected with this discomfort is that the understanding of faith is not monolithic in this country. The variance complicates our ability to communicate and understand one another. This extra work on our part can hinder our willingness to reach out to the faith community to dialogue with them

about the values, direction, and function of our profession. The other issue is that houses of worship are decentralized, making involvement more difficult. With multiple faiths each having multiple traditions that have multiple organizational structures, it causes communication both with and within the faith community very challenging. Difficult communication often causes people to withdraw from one another. As we withdraw from the faith community, we fail in providing leadership regarding volunteer engagement.

It is for these reasons, it is imperative for us to reach out to the faith community and invite them to engage in the dialogue and share in the leadership of volunteer engagement. In so doing, we will understand them and their needs while we help them understand our volunteer resource management profession and our needs. By including the faith community we will find common ground that broadens our conversation, we will better understand everyone’s needs, we will find better solutions that benefits all, and we will increase the strength and vitality our profession as a whole.

About the Author

Rob Bonesteel has professionally engaged volunteers since 1997. Currently he is the volunteer director for The Salvation Army Central Territory serving the 11 Midwest states. He is also active in promoting the field of volunteer engagement. Currently he is the president elect for the Association of Leaders in Volunteer Engagement and the past president for his local association, the Association of Volunteer Administrators of Metropolitan Chicago.