**The Wall between Faith-Based and Secular Volunteerism:
Is it Time to Chip Away at the Barrier?**

By Karen Kogler

> *Before I built a wall I'd ask to know*
> *What I was walling in or walling out. . . .*
> *Something there is that doesn't love a wall.*
> − *Robert Frost*

In the poem "Mending Wall," Robert Frost considers his neighbor's belief that "good fences make good neighbors." In this article, I examine a 'wall' of separation, ignorance or avoidance that exists in many places between two volunteerism worlds: the world of faith-based volunteering, and the world of volunteering which is secular. I contend that there are important reasons to reduce or eliminate that wall.

I use the image of a wall because the separation of these two volunteerism worlds is related to the "wall between church and state,"[1] a phrase which refers to the 1791 First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Because it protects freedom of religion, this "wall between church and state" is highly valued in the U.S. However, our American love of privacy has, over time, extended that wall, so that it often separates all aspects of faith and spirituality, (including faith-based groups), from other aspects of community life. Faith is seen as private, with the expectation that people will keep it private. Like many others, I was raised with the admonition, "Don't talk about religion or politics," so that we wouldn't cause offense or start arguments.

In recent decades, faith talk has become more public. But the strident, argumentative, angry and even violent nature of much of that talk, and the harmful actions of religious "extremists," have encouraged most people to add more bricks to the wall of separation. Avoidance has increased, and there is less true communication.

The relationship between faith groups and secular groups certainly differs in other countries (secular being defined as "of or pertaining to things that are not regarded as religious, spiritual or sacred," according to *Webster's Dictionary*). But because many factors are international − increased immigration, culture clashes over religious practices, the decline of some religious

groups and the rise of others, violent extremism − I suspect there may well be at least gulfs, if not walls, between faith-based and secular volunteerism in other countries, too.

Personal Experience, Personal Perspective

Readers should first be aware of the perspective from which I view this wall. Throughout my life, I've been active in the church in which I was raised, the oddly-named Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. My church formed when German immigrants came to America in the mid-19th century, and it is now the second-largest (2.4 million people), and more conservative, of American Lutheran denominations. Raised in California, my marriage to a professional church musician brought mobility; most of our time has been spent in the American Midwest. A member of nine local congregations over the years, I've volunteered at all of them, and been employed by some of them − first as parochial school teacher, then as office secretary and, in 10 of the last 15 years, in managing church volunteers.

The concept of volunteer management within the church was new and exciting to me when I began in 1993. I immediately found out how much the church could learn from the volunteer management world outside the church. One of the first books I read was Marlene Wilson's pioneering book on the subject, *How to Mobilize Church Volunteers*. In it, she described how the connection between both worlds of volunteer management happened for her:

After being deeply involved in the secular volunteer management field for 15 years [director of a volunteer center in Boulder, Colorado], it came as a shock to me how I had separated my Sunday and weekday worlds. I had clearly seen the need for management skills in secular volunteer groups, but it took a long time until it occurred to me how similar the need was in the church.[2]

I had trained at Wilson's Volunteer Management program at the University of Colorado. I joined the Association of Volunteer Administration (AVA), attended a national AVA convention, started work on a Certified Volunteer Administrator credential, and attended local DOVIA (Directors of Volunteers in Agencies) meetings. The world of secular volunteer management was, and still is, of great value to me. When I write for church publications and lead workshops in churches, I recommend many resources from this world. But I always feel some awkwardness when moving in the secular volunteerism world. Some discussions are foreign to my world, some foundational issues differ, and I'm not comfortable bringing up some faith-based questions. Certain things are kept on one side or the other of the wall.

But eliminating personal discomfort is the least of the reasons that I would suggest for chipping away at the wall of separation, ignorance and avoidance between the secular and the faith-based volunteering worlds. Our commonalities, our shared goals and our existing connections are the better reasons for dismantling the wall. Many − perhaps most − people volunteering in secular organizations are people of faith and their faith likely plays a role in their volunteering. Churches, synagogues and mosques often share goals with secular volunteer groups. All work to help people in need and to change societal conditions which cause pain, injustice and suffering. Volunteers in both faith-based and secular groups share common passions − feeding the hungry, serving the underprivileged, righting injustice.

While volunteer management is non-existent or in its infancy in most faith-based organizations, volunteering certainly isn't. Many agencies that are thought of as secular − social service and adoption agencies, hospitals and food pantries, as well as familiar organizations such as the YMCA − have religious origins. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that religious organizations topped the list of organizations where U.S. volunteers worked in 2007.[3,] In addition, as mentioned above, many of the principles and practices of managing volunteers are common to both worlds. Whether or not all of these reasons translate to other countries and cultures, I would suspect the common goals and passions are

near universal.

About Faith-based Volunteerism

Come visit the faith-based side of the wall with me. A first and crucial observation is that every faith-based organization is different, very different. A synagogue is vastly different from a Christian church, and a church is different from a mosque. Gatherings of believers of faiths other than these big three are different yet. Within each religion, and within the various Christian denominations, a wide variety of beliefs and practices exist. The culture of every country or region also colors the way a particular faith is expressed there. Differences also exist on a local level. Faith is expressed primarily in local gatherings. The history, traditions and culture of each local group influence the group's decisions and practices as much, if not more, than the group's ties to a national or international faith organization. Which helps explain why two churches of the same conservative Lutheran affiliation in the same city can be vastly different.

A local faith group can be its own self-enclosed world. Not only is it the spiritual home of its members, and the place where they volunteer, it can also be the social, educational and recreational center of their nuclear and extended family. It is not uncommon for a local faith group to be ignorant of other local faith groups, including those of similar religious background. In contrast, some faith groups intentionally focus outward on their community; one example is Leadership Network's "externally focused" movement. But all faith groups, even externally focused ones, have, by default or design, a particular internal culture that shapes them and drives their decisions.

An individual's connection to their faith community is often deep and intimate. For many, their faith is more important than life itself and its values and directives impact all aspects of their life. Even those with a weaker connection, those who don't attend weekly religious services and those who don't think of faith issues often in their daily lives, are likely to think of and connect with their faith community in life's major events: marriage, births of children, major illnesses and the death of loved ones.

The strengths of faith-based volunteerism include the deep passion and the great commitment in time and energy of its volunteers. Perhaps its greatest strength is that the work being done is connected to the beliefs and values of the faith itself, a connection to something eternal. When the volunteer work is tied to a relationship with a higher Being, the work is often done with a humble, servant-like attitude. A further strength is the strong community bond that develops within the local faith group. The people who volunteer together may also have grown up together, raised their children together and experienced each other's tragedies and triumphs.

But there are weaknesses in this world, too. Its insular nature can result in awkwardness in the 'outside' world, or suspicion of it and fear of 'contamination' by 'outsiders.' The world of faith-based volunteering is hurt deeply and in many ways when some people of faith are involved publicly in negative, hurtful, or just plain illegal activities. From my experience in Christian churches, I can say that they have a tendency to burn out their own volunteers, to use guilt to motivate, and to place people in positions based primarily on the church's needs rather than the person's abilities and interests. It is not unknown for people to change churches simply to get out of volunteer obligations.

Today, Christian churches in the United States are facing volunteerism challenges. In addition to burning out our volunteers, we are finding it harder to turn participants into volunteers. People work longer hours, own more 'toys,' schedule more activities for themselves and their children, and have many options available to them beyond church involvement. They have less tolerance than previous generations when we do not motivate, communicate, organize

or support our volunteers well. In general, change does not come easy to many faith-based groups, and we live in a fast-changing world. I would suspect that some of these factors present challenges to faith-based groups of all types around the world.

Benefits of working together

As I see it, both the faith-based and secular worlds of volunteerism would benefit from the demolition of the wall that often separates us. Benefits for the faith-based groups include:

- Increased adoption of the volunteer management skills prevalent in secular volunteerism: writing job descriptions, interviewing, orienting and training, risk management, record-keeping, etc.
- Benefiting from the knowledge, experience and networking that make secular groups effective in assisting the underprivileged and improving community conditions.
- Increased community involvement.
- Seeing that it is possible, and profitable, to work together with secular groups to accomplish common purposes.
- Learning how to have constructive conversations about faith issues in secular settings.

For secular volunteer groups, benefits include:

- Increasing the number and strength of their volunteers by more connections to the passion and commitment of faith-based volunteers.
- Increased community within the group through the community-oriented nature of faith-based volunteers.
- Seeing that it is possible, and profitable, to accomplish common goals with faith-based groups.
- Modeling an environment in which people of various faith backgrounds, and people of no faith-based affiliation, can choose to engage in honest and respectful conversations about spiritual values and issues as they work together in common purpose.

Facing the Challenges

Before we knock down walls and build partnerships, we must consider how we'd deal with the challenges of working together. Can we build an environment where the two groups could work together? We have met such challenges before, by building an environment in which diverse people work together: people of different ethnicities, cultures and countries of origin; people of different socio-economic and educational backgrounds, etc. Can we do the same with people of diverse faith groups?

People of different religions certainly do work together. But when they do, it is common to ignore the differences, to have a tacit understanding that we don't talk about or acknowledge them. But in my view, that approach only adds bricks to the wall. Perhaps this "it doesn't matter" approach has even contributed to the increasing stridency in religious conversations. My hope is that we can do better, and that it is worth it to try.

Virtually all people think about spiritual questions and ideas, and have a spiritual viewpoint. Ignoring this aspect of ourselves, or silencing ourselves about it, ignores a major part of who we are. In contrast, sharing viewpoints builds relationships and community within a group. The better we know each other, the better we work together and the more we accomplish. In addition, our world needs models of constructive conversations on spiritual matters. It's healthy to ask questions and to listen.

Volunteer management professionals are leaders in appreciation of diversity. We bring together people of all abilities and backgrounds. We know everyone has something to contribute. We know how to use differences to multiply what can be accomplished. We can be models in spiritual diversity, too.

I'm not naive enough to think it will be easy. Religious beliefs are sufficiently important that some people will die for them; some few others are willing to kill for them. It also won't work to declare that: we can have open religious conversation under the premise that there is no right or wrong when it comes to religion; everyone can believe whatever they want because it doesn't matter; there is no objective truth; truth is whatever is true for you. Those beliefs go against reason. If you and I hold different views about the existence and nature of a higher Being, or different views on what will happen when we die, we could both be wrong, or one could be right and the other wrong, but we can't both be correct.

Proselytizing, which is the act of attempting to convert others to one's belief, is the nuclear center of spiritual conversation, the point that causes fear of massive explosion. People who are rude or who harass when they proselytize give the term a bad name. Actually, it's very natural to tell another person about something you think will benefit or please them − whether it's a treatment for indigestion, a place to get a great dinner at a bargain price, a good book to read, or answers to spiritual questions. The problem isn't the invitation to try something new; it's actions that are rude or harassing. If we are willing to listen to each other, willing to be courteous, willing to acknowledge that we'll often agree to disagree, and willing to avoid the subject entirely with individuals who ask us to, I believe that we can not only "get along" with each other but that we can learn and grow from each other.

Perhaps there are many places where these open and honest conversations on spiritual issues are common. But I'm not seeing many. From my viewpoint, this is a new skill to be learned. Formal guidelines would be needed in most secular organizations to teach what is expected and what is not permitted, just as has been done in recent years regarding sexual words and actions in the workplace. And who better than the volunteer manager − skilled at bringing people together, skilled at providing the training and information people need to work together effectively − to break new ground? Who better to think these issues through, write guidelines and model the behaviors? Who better to dismantle the wall of separation, ignorance and avoidance between sacred and secular?

Partnering with religious organizations

Part of dismantling the wall is the ability to create partnerships that bridge the gulf (pardon the mixing of metaphors). Although I strongly encourage both faith-based and secular groups to build these partnerships, I am addressing my secular volunteer management colleagues in this article. You, I feel, are the ones most likely to initiate and achieve partnerships. You have the partnership-building skills and experience, while only a small percentage of faith-based groups even have someone working in volunteer management!

Consider these partnering suggestions:

Types of Partnerships

- An initial partnership is most easily created to meet a mutual goal involving a one-time event, a longer-term project, or a particular community need.

- The most natural partnership arises when you notice a faith-based group doing work that is similar or complementary to the work of your organization.

- When you broach the idea of partnership, mention your volunteer management resources and experience as a possible benefit for the religious group. They might otherwise never consider that the procedures you use in working with volunteers could translate into their 'world.'

Getting to know Faith-based Groups

- Ask your current volunteers about their faith group. They can likely tell you where their organization is already at work and whether they might be open to a partnership. They can also connect you with the best person to talk to.

- Consider partnership with your own spiritual group, or a group in your community of a faith tradition in which you have previous experience. Your experience will make it easier to move in that world.

- The senior clergy or leader is usually key to approving a partnership, but other key people may offer more practical help in the exploration stages. Look for active, long-time participants who know the history and culture of the group, such as office staff and leaders of major volunteer groups.

- Some religious groups may have a volunteer coordinator; most will not. In the absence of a volunteer coordinator, talk to those who do most of the recruiting.

Working with Faith-based Groups

- Find out the needs and goals of faith-based groups regarding volunteerism. How can your partnership help them as well as you?

- Find out what is important to them. The larger the group, the more likely that their mission and values will be frequently and well articulated. The smaller the group, the more likely that values will be unwritten, but they will come out in conversation.

- Listen for what the group members *don't* say. They may be completely unfamiliar with volunteer management tools you take for granted: job descriptions, risk management policies, etc. Even if they see you using them, it might not occur to them that these are appropriate tools for them, too.

- As your partnership gets established, work with one or two key people in the group. Let them do most of the interaction with the organization, as they know its culture and system.

- Be patient. Most faith-based groups have been around a good while. Change often comes slowly.

If you're partnering with a particular faith-based group, see if their regional/national/international offices (you can look for them on the Internet) offer volunteer management resources. These resources will give you insights into that faith group, and might provide common ground between your world and theirs. In my experience with resources that cover all Christian churches, I find most are strong in theology and weak in practical application, or they offer a one-size-fits-all solution. *The Equipping Church* by Sue Mallory, and the accompanying *The Equipping Church Guidebook* by Mallory and Brad Smith (Zondervan, 2001), are exceptions. *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success* by Susan J. Ellis (Energize, 1996) is an excellent resource to share with clergy.

Although it doesn't mention faith-based executives, it will open the eyes of these leaders to how much organizational and people management skills they have in common with their secular counterparts.

In late January 2008, Palestinians in Gaza tore down a wall so they could get food in Egypt. In 1989, the fall of the wall that separated Communist East Berlin from West Berlin mesmerized the watching world. If we can't demolish the wall that often separates the secular and faith-based volunteerism worlds, let's at least put a door in it and visit each other from time to time.

Footnotes

[1] The phrase is attributed to Thomas Jefferson in an 1802 letter. See http://www.usconstitution.net/jeffwall.html.

[2] *How to Mobilize Church Volunteers* by Marlene Wilson. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983. pg 46-7.

[3]"Volunteering in the United States, 2007" by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor; accessed 3-3-08 at http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm.

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