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Upfront

Divine Intervention

Why the most religious societies have the most volunteers

By Alana Conner Snibbe

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Divine Intervention

Why the most religious societies have the most volunteers

Lutheran World Relief (LWR) has no trouble finding volunteers in highly religious Tanzania, says Kathryn Wolford, president of the Baltimore-based social service organization. Although LWR provides material and technical support for its programs in the East African country, “it really is the local churches that recruit the volunteers,” she says.

The local churches do a good job. Annually, 74.2 percent of Tanzanians

Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands. The researchers’ study of religiosity and volunteering in 53 countries reveals that “in more religious communities, people are more involved with volunteering,” even if they are not personally religious, says Ruiter.

Moved by their religion’s commandments to help, the devout not only motivate each other to pitch in, but also recruit their nonreligious

gions ranging from the Abrahamic to the Zoroastrian, the authors report in the April 2006 issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

Previous research had already shown that regular churchgoers volunteer more than the less observant. What’s new about this study is that it demonstrates that religious contexts (as measured by the percentage of regular churchgoers in a society) increase altruistic outreach above and beyond what religious individuals might have done on their own. “Context matters,” says Ruiter. In secular societies, for example, there is a big difference between how much the nonreligious and the religious volunteer. In societies where many people regularly attend services, however, there is little difference in the beneficence of the pious versus the profane.

The authors further find that non-Christians donate more of their time and effort than do Christians, and that among Christians, Protestants volunteer more than Catholics. They also show that the countries with the most helping hands are in sub-Saharan Africa. “Usually, the Nordic countries, Canada, the U.S., and the Netherlands come up highest,” says Ruiter. “But those studies are based on Western societies,” and so do not include African nations. Sub-Saharan Africa tends to be both very religious and very altruistic.

“People don’t separate their going to church from the rest of their life,” agrees Wolford, reflecting on the Tanzanian volunteers with whom she has worked. “They live their faith.”

—Alana Conner Snibbe



Tanzanian volunteers gather before rolling off to serve remote clients in the Dodoma region. Although food and water are in short supply in this drought-stricken area, local volunteers are plentiful.

lend an unpaid hand, compared to 38.4 percent of the more secular Americans, and 9.9 percent of the highly secular Russians, find Stijn Ruiter and Nan Dirk de Graaf, both of

neighbors, Ruiter explains. The wave of volunteering further spills over from religious to secular organizations. This pattern holds true from Albania to Zimbabwe, and for reli-