

Giving & God

How generous would we be without religious encouragement?

By Karl Zinsmeister

From its founding, the United States has been the most religious modern nation on earth. And our religious devotion has fueled many of our successes in character development, culture reform, and productive growth. Yet right from our founding decades, American religious activity has been cyclical—flowing and ebbing and flowing, cresting and falling and cresting again. Historians have identified up to four “great awakenings” in U.S. history where religious understanding and passion surged. In between were periods of backsliding.

Today, we are in a period of decline. Steep decline.

As recently as 1972, 95 percent of Americans affirmed a religious affiliation. By 2014 that had fallen to 77 percent (according to the Pew Research Center). *<graph 1 near here>* The proportion of adults who attend religious services weekly is now 36 percent. *<graph 2 near here>*

It's younger Americans in particular who are falling away. Just 27 percent of adults under 30 attend services weekly. And almost four out of ten 18-29 year olds say they have no religious affiliation. *<graph 3 near here>*

What does it mean to be religiously unaffiliated? Well, roughly six out of ten of that group consider themselves secular, and three out of ten are active disbelievers. (The small remainder identify as a “religious person” but not with a particular faith.) Most of the religiously unaffiliated are suspicious of religion.

Open antagonism toward faith is increasingly common in the U.S. There are now regular calls for crimping longstanding religious protections. In 2015, *New York Times* religion columnist Mark Oppenheimer urged that the gay marriage debate was a good occasion to end the historic tax exemption for houses of worship. The view that expressions of faith must be expunged from national debates, from educational institutions, from sporting and other public events, is on the rise. “There are a lot of nonbelievers who want religious views kept out of the public square entirely. That’s a big problem,” pastor Tim Keller recently told *Philanthropy*.

Underlying this resistance to religious feeling and action is an assumption that religion is not important to the functioning of our nation, isn’t particularly useful to our citizenry, indeed may be harmful in many ways, and can be pushed entirely into a private sphere without any public cost. A majority of today’s religiously unaffiliated Americans believe that religious institutions do little or nothing to solve social problems. *<graph 4 near here>* Fully half of *all* Americans, now opine that efforts to help the poor, comfort the needy, relieve disaster victims, and otherwise serve the common good would be just as prevalent “if there were no people of faith or religious organizations to do them.” *<graph 5 near here>*

Those Americans are mistaken.

The Humanitarian Habits of Religious People

When researchers look at how people spend their hours and their money in real life, religious Americans look very different from others. Pew investigators examined a large sample of the public during a randomly chosen seven-day period. They found that among Americans who attend

services weekly and pray daily, fully 45 percent had done volunteer work within the last week. Among all other Americans, 27 percent had volunteered somewhere. <graph 6 near here>

The capacity of religion to motivate “prosocial” behavior goes way beyond volunteering. Religious people take a bigger role in mutual-aid activities of all sorts. They are more involved in community groups. They have stronger links with their neighbors. They are more engaged with their own families. Pew has found that among Americans who attend worship weekly and pray daily, almost half gather with extended family members at least once a month. For the rest of our population, it’s 30 percent. <graph 7 near here> Of all the “associational” activity that takes place in the U.S., almost half is church-related, according to Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam.

Religious practice links us in webs of mutual knowledge, responsibility, and support like no other influence. Seven out of ten weekly church attenders told Pew they consider “work to help the needy” an “essential part” of their faith. Nearly all of them put their money and time where their mouth is: 65 percent of weekly church attenders were found to have donated either volunteer hours or money or goods to the poor within the previous week. <graph 8 near here>

“As a whole, secularism is not good for society,” noted Tim Keller in his Winter 2018 interview with *Philanthropy*. “Let’s acknowledge that there are individual secular people who are happier from having got out from under an unhealthy religion. Obviously, unhealthy religion does exist. But secularism writ large is causing problems in our culture.” Among other things, secularism “undermines the family. The more secular you are the less likely you are to marry, they less likely you are to have children, the fewer children you have.”

In particular, religious absence is damaging selflessness and generosity. “Secularism makes people more self-centered. Jonathan Haidt and other sociologists have shown this,” Keller continues. “Religion creates a solidarity and cohesion that cannot be reproduced by secularism. In Israel, for instance, secular kibbutzim have not lasted nearly as long as the religious ones.” Secularism “makes people very fragmented—they might talk about community, but they aren’t sacrificing their own personal goals for community, as religion requires you to do.”

Philanthropic research shows that people with religious affiliation give away several *times* as much every year as other Americans. The Lilly School at Indiana University found average annual donations of \$1,590 for Americans with any religious affiliation, versus \$695 for those with no religious affiliation. An investigation by the Panel Study for Income Dynamics juxtaposed Americans who never attend religious services with those who attend worship at least twice a month, and made many demographic fine-tunings to compare apples to apples. The results: \$2,935 of annual charitable giving for the church attenders, versus \$704 for the non-attenders. <graph 9 near here>

In addition to giving larger amounts, the religious give more often—making gifts about half-again as frequently. Indeed, religious practice is the behavioral variable most consistently associated with generous giving. And people with religious motivations don’t give just to religious causes—they are also much likelier to give to secular causes than the non-religious. Two thirds of people who worship at least twice a month give to secular causes, compared to less than half of non-attenders, and the average gift by a church attender is 20 percent bigger. <graph 10 near here>

These giving levels vary by particular faith. Mormons are the most generous Americans, both by participation level and by size of gifts. Evangelical Christians are next. Then come mainline Christians. Catholics lag both. Jews give high dollar amounts on average, because they have high earnings, but trail Christian givers in donations as a share of income.

How Important is Religious Motivation to Philanthropy?

America’s tradition of voluntary charitable giving is one of the clearest markers of U.S. exceptionalism. As a fraction of our income, we donate over two and a half *times* as much as

Britons do, more than eight times as much as the Germans, and at 12 times the rate of the Japanese.

American religiosity plays a central role in that distinctive pattern of philanthropy. The annual *Giving USA* tabulations categorize 32 percent of our donations as going to religious causes. Even the *Giving USA* statisticians acknowledge that this is a gross underestimate, however. Their calculations include only gifts to houses of worship and related mission organizations. Excluded from their total, they point out, are gifts to faith-based organizations like the Salvation Army and gospel missions for the homeless, to religious schools of all sorts, to Catholic hospitals, to the Jewish federations, to missionary organizations that serve the poor abroad, and so forth.

A consortium of Jewish funders and other independent foundations called Connected to Give commissioned studies to produce a more inclusive and accurate estimate of religiously driven giving. Their 2013 report conglomerated gifts to churches and synagogues with gifts to religious charities and found that fully 73 percent of all charitable giving in the U.S. goes to organizations that are explicitly religious. (Of America's top 50 charities, 40 percent are faith-based, other research shows.) <graph 11 near here>

An even more inclusive 2016 study by Georgetown University economist Brian Grim calculated the economic value of all U.S. religious activity. Its midrange estimate was that religion annually contributes \$1.2 trillion of socio-economic value to the U.S. economy. This includes not only the fair market value of activity connected to churches (like \$91 billion of religious schooling and daycare), and by non-church religious institutions (faith-based charities, hospitals, and colleges), but also activity by faith-related for-profit organizations. That \$1.2 trillion is more than the combined revenue of America's ten biggest tech giants. It is bigger than the total economy of all but 14 entire nations.

Ways the Religious Help Others

To get a sense of the often-invisible ways in which persons of faith help others, consider giving to the poorest of the poor overseas. The most conspicuous philanthropy done in this area is carried out by the Gates Foundation. Gates contributions in Africa and other low-income countries are the signature effort of the world's largest charitable endowment, and have had heroic effects. For example, it is estimated that overseas vaccine programs paid for by Gates have now saved 8 million lives, primarily children.

That is a marvelous accomplishment for any philanthropic effort. But now absorb this: members of U.S. churches and synagogues send four-and-a-half times as much money overseas to needy people every year as the Gates Foundation does! Much of this religious charity is applied in the hardest places, with high efficiency and low overhead, by Christians who "go the last mile" where governments and international bureaucracies have no effective reach. (See "Modern Missionaries" in the Spring 2018 issue of *Philanthropy*.)

It is easy to overlook this giving, because it comes not in megagifts from billionaires but rather in millions of \$50 checks written by faithful donors to groups like Samaritan's Purse, World Vision, International Justice Mission, Mercy Ships, Compassion International, Catholic Medical Mission Board, MAP International, and so forth. Over the last couple decades, soaring interest in the poorest of the poor by evangelical Christians in particular has made overseas giving the fastest growing corner of American charity. One result: U.S. voluntary giving to the overseas poor now totals \$44 billion annually—far more than the \$33 billion of official aid distributed by the U.S. government.

There are many other types of charity and social healing where religious givers are dominant influences.

- Religious Americans adopt children at two-and-a-half times the overall national rate, and they play a particularly large role in fostering and adopting troubled and hard-to-place youngsters. *<graph 12 near here>*
- Local church congregations, aided by umbrella groups like Catholic Charities, now provide most of the day-to-day help that resettles refugees and asylum seekers arriving in the U.S.
- Research shows that the bulk of volunteers mentoring prisoners and their families, both while they are incarcerated and after they are released, are Christians eager to welcome offenders back into society, help them succeed, and avoid their return to crime.
- The educational alternative that draws most of the headlines today is charter schooling, which serves 3 million children. Much less often acknowledged is the fact that there are 34,000 religious schools in the U.S. educating 4.5 million children each year. There is evidence these religious schools offer qualitative advantages over conventional public schools: their students experience less violence and bullying and feel more secure, are more engaged with their community, and produce average SAT scores 134 points higher than the combined average for all public-school students. *<graph 13 near here>*
- Religious hospitals care for one out of every five U.S. hospital patients. Sixteen percent of all hospital beds are in Catholic institutions, and additional large healthcare systems are run by Adventists, Baptists, Methodists, and other faiths. *<graph 14 near here>*
- Faith-based organizations are at the forefront of both care and recovery for the homeless. A 2017 study found that 58 percent of the emergency shelter beds in 11 surveyed cities are maintained by religious providers—who also provided many of the addiction, health care, education, and job services needed to help the homeless regain their independence. *<graph 15 near here>*
- Local congregations provide 130,000 alcohol-recovery programs.
- Local congregations provide 120,000 programs that assist the unemployed.
- Local congregations provide 26,000 programs to help people living with HIV or AIDS—one ministry for every 46 people infected with the virus.
- Churches recruit a large portion of the volunteers needed to operate organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, America’s thousands of food pantries and feeding programs, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the Red Cross, and other volunteer-dependent charities.

One strength of religious philanthropy is sheer numbers. There are 345,000 congregations stretched across our nation. If you wander America, notes economist Brian Grim, you will pass 25 churches for every Starbucks outlet you come across. The millions of decentralized services provided by those churches are worth billions of dollars, and have many healthy effects on their communities, research shows. The offerings include things like free or below-market rents for space provided to community groups, preschool and daycare offerings, many types of social services, arts events, Boy Scout and sports-team sponsorships, thousands of volunteer hours, and cash and in-kind support for many individuals and worthy causes. *<graph 16 near here>*

Multi-decade research led by University of Pennsylvania professor Ram Cnaan has found large human and economic benefits from church operations. One of his studies of older urban churches found that 89 percent of total visits to these institutions were to take part in a program, educational offering, or community event, rather than for worship. Nine out of ten beneficiaries of these community programs were not members of the religious congregation. Cnaan estimated that the economic impact alone these houses of worship have on their neighborhood averages \$1.7 million per year. Multiply that by many thousands of churches nationwide, and then add in non-economic improvements in social life and individual behavior, and you can see the potential for large effects. *<graph 17 near here>*

Not surprisingly, studies of church closures conducted by Nancy Kinney and others find that shutting down a city congregation will often damage a neighborhood's viability and socio-economic health. Conversely, active churches, religious schools sponsored by churches, and church-aided neighborhood ministries (like the Zarephath Health Center profiled in "Medical Matchmaking" in the Fall 2017 issue of *Philanthropy*) can often have strong effects in stabilizing and revitalizing communities.

It isn't just a matter of serving and healing others. People of faith also behave differently themselves. There is lots of evidence that in addition to encouraging a "brother's keeper" attitude that manifests itself in lots of philanthropy and volunteering, religious participation also inculcates healthy habits that help individuals resist destructive personal behavior themselves. A classic study by Harvard economist James Freeman found that black males living in inner-city poverty tracts were much less likely to engage in crime and drug use if they attended church, and that church attendance was associated with better academic performance and more success in holding jobs. Followup studies found that regular church attendance could even help counterbalance threats to child success like parental absence, low school quality, local drug traffic, and crime in the neighborhood.

Regular religious participation is correlated with many positive social outcomes. It results in less poverty, fewer divorces and more marital happiness, fewer births out of wedlock, less suicide, reduced binge-drinking, less depression, better relationships. This is true among Americans of all demographic backgrounds.

Causes for concern

Given all the evidence that religious practice increases healthy living patterns, and feeds empathy and generosity toward others, recent patterns of religious decline are concerning. The generational trends—a third of 18-29 year olds saying they are religiously unaffiliated, and only 27 percent attending services weekly—suggest that the philanthropic sharing that has long powered social reform and self-improvement in America, resulting in a healthier society and happier citizens, could sag in the future. Indeed, recent research on voluntary giving says that future is already here.

Three important investigations in the last year or so uncovered alarming declines in the breadth of American giving. A Lilly School of Philanthropy report found that the fraction of U.S. households giving to charity dropped from 68 to 56 percent from 2003 to 2015. IRS data analyzed by the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* showed a drop in charitable deduction itemizing from 30 percent of all filers to 24 percent over the latest ten years. A study by Texas A&M academics reported "sharp declines in overall donative behavior" over the last decade. *<graphs 18 and 19 near here>*

In addition to generational change, it seems that wealth effects are depressing religious philanthropy. Though giving has recently declined on a mass basis, giving by the rich continues to be strong. The rich, however, tend to give to different causes than everyday Americans.

A good way to see this is by tracing the money that Americans now donate through Donor-Advised Funds. DAFs are a practical and popular mechanism for making charitable distributions, but they are primarily used by high-income people, not average earners. The patterns in DAF giving are basically representative of the charity of the wealthy. And they show that the wealthy, like the young, have grown less interested in religion and religious charity than other Americans.

In 2016, when 32 percent of all U.S. philanthropy was channeled through churches and direct religious missions (the narrow definition of "religious charity" used by the *Giving USA* report), only 13 percent of giving through DAFs was directed to those same institutions. In other words, high-income households practiced much less overt religious charity. If giving by moderate-income households fades such that donations by the wealthy become more dominant in the future, then today's DAF patterns could be a taste what U.S. philanthropy in general will eventually look like.

Expect a bigger flow to colleges and art galleries, much less to charities motivated by religious concern for the least and the lost. <graph 20 near here>

Can donors bolster religious practice and giving?

We know religious devotion creates philanthropy. Can that causation arrow be reversed? Can intelligent philanthropy bolster religious practice and the many good things that flow from it?

Obviously a good deal of Christian evangelism is premised on the answer to that question being yes. Groups like Young Life, Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ), Navigators, InterVarsity, FOCUS, and the Christian Union aim to interest young people in a life of devotion. A relatively new Consortium of Christian Study Centers supports residential and social groups on college campuses that support devotion. Organizations like Chabad, Birthright, and Tikvah have recently begun to energetically encourage secularized Jews to practice their faith. And there are myriad donor-supported organizations like the Salvation Army, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Focus on the Family, Prison Fellowship, Oxford House, St. Vincent de Paul Society, and so forth that help Americans solve problems in their lives by applying religious wisdoms—with additional hope of leading the beneficiaries to wider and deeper practice of faith, to their own benefit and the benefit of the wider community.

But few philanthropists have attempted to bolster faith and good works through focused, strategic efforts not linked to a specific social problem. What if donors concerned by today's apparent decline in religious practice adopted some of the practical, hard-headed strategies used by donors to build up the charter school movement? I believe charters will someday be viewed as one of the great social inventions and problem-solving innovations of our generation. Can the successes of their philanthropic backers teach anything to would-be progenitors of active churches, synagogues, and religious missions?

Charter-school donors have made two resource-intensive, highly effective interventions in launching their crusade.

One: They funded leader training. Fellowships, incubators, Teach for America grants, new education schools, and other methods were employed to turn out a passionate, well-instructed, carefully mentored new group of school founders, principals, and teachers.

Two: Charter donors put up crucial funds to help these leaders lock in the crucial piece missing from many charter-school plans (the movement's Achilles heel): the acquisition of an adequate building. Because charters are primarily placed in densely populated cities where the need and number of people are greatest, real-estate costs have been a stumbling block for many social entrepreneurs. Donors have helped solve that.

Let's take a few moments to imagine how contributions similar to those made to charter schools might be offered by philanthropists eager to reinforce religious conviction, and the societal benefits that flower therefrom. Could donors steal some of the charter-school thunder? Could they fund a house-of-worship bloom, especially in influential urban areas where young and unchurched persons are heavily represented—bringing in train constructive behavioral transformations and religious charitable action against poverty, school failure, family breakdown, violence, and other ills?

Religious Frontier #1—Beefed-up seminaries

Leaders—competitively selected, carefully trained, high-energy leaders—are the crucial ingredient behind any successful culture reform. One reason many churches are struggling today is because of leadership crises. The disastrous pastoral shortages and scandals afflicting the Catholic Church are well known. Protestantism is also having challenges.

"We don't have enough leaders," warns Tim Keller. "We need more people to go into the ministry and start churches." His organization Redeemer City to City (which aims to create 100 successful new churches in New York City over the next decade, and hundreds more in other parts

of the U.S., using \$80 million in donated funds, of which \$70 million has already been pledged) recently helped set up a new branch of Reformed Theological Seminary in New York City, as well as a new master's program that will specifically train leaders for new urban churches. Nationwide there is a need for many more—and better—pipelines like this, capable of training a new generation of effective pastors and lay leaders.

“Seminary scholarships ought to be very appealing to donors,” Keller suggests, “because it’s a relatively small investment with the potential to have very powerful results for decades after. Our big problem today is that ministry in a complex society takes graduate training, yet, unlike law and medicine and business, the prospects of higher salaries to pay off student debt are not there. So candidates who would love to enroll can’t bear the expense. And the seminaries don’t have wealthy alumni to turn to for support, like other graduate schools.”

“I could see a donor investing in partnerships between churches and seminaries to create excellent, affordable instruction. The seminary would be responsible for the many academic pieces that go into training a minister. And the churches could oversee formulation of practical, more hands-on training in how to create a congregation that will appeal to urban audiences.”

“I was on a call recently with leaders of Gordon Conwell Seminary, and they are talking with their donors about sending seminary faculty right out to local churches to teach classes, maybe instruct over video, teach at night, reach more students. The traditional model is that you have 20 professors on campus and all the students have to live there. That’s great for faculty—no night courses, no weekends, no travel. But it is extraordinarily expensive now to do it that way. And it eliminates candidates who have a day job or a family to support. Distributed instruction could not only train new pastors but benefit lay leaders, Sunday School teachers, unconventional ministry candidates, and others.”

Americans are now much less likely to attend church as a kind of cultural habit, or because that’s how you conform, Keller notes. “The number of people who go to church and profess faith because of custom or social pressure is shrinking rapidly.” Indeed, religious devotion is fast becoming a kind of counter-cultural act. One difficulty resulting from the death of the church habit is that it is much harder than it used to be to get people into a house of worship for their first serious experience. A positive flip side, however, is that the folks who do show up tend to be sincere, enthusiastic, and not interested in a watered-down experience. “Churches that have abandoned orthodox beliefs are emptying very fast,” says Keller (a statement that is backed up by all attendance statistics).

“So we need to start new churches that operate more like the earliest churches operated—bringing, with real conviction, the remarkable message of Christianity to people without belief, such that many are converted and genuinely change their lives, becoming more inwardly integrated and strong and joyful, and more outwardly generous to their neighbors.”

This demands fresh approaches to training church leaders. Many mainline seminaries are somnolent today, facing declining enrollments and budget crises that are causing some to sell off buildings or entire campuses. In the same way that the school-reform movement found it impossible to develop the leaders it needed through conventional teacher colleges, and ultimately had to create its own training pathways, what’s needed now for religious leadership is not more sleepy, old-line seminary training. Instead, resources should be channeled to today’s most earnest and effective seminaries, or fresh creations that mimic them, and carefully targeted to instruction that mixes traditionalism in theology with innovation in forms and routines.

The training should include a strong dash of entrepreneurial guidance, so there are more pastors equipped to create new churches after (or instead of) holding jobs at existing institutions. And most of the church planters, Keller urges, “should go to cities to start churches, because the people of the world are moving to cities. We should go where the people are going.”

Religious Frontier #2—Fixing the facilities mismatch

A second way philanthropists could boost religious involvement in America would be to invest in solving the serious spatial mismatch that exists among our hundreds of thousands of churches. It is a great irony today that the grand, built-to-last, visually inspiring churches and synagogues distributed across the cores of almost every U.S. city today are often occupied by vestigial congregations hanging on by their fingernails. Without their inherited endowments, many of these churches couldn't keep the lights on and the roof from leaking (many barely do even with their trust funds). Meanwhile those same cities almost always have large, growing, enthusiastic congregations that lack buildings adequate to house all of their activities, much less inspire participants in the way that a traditional house of worship aims to.

In every metro area, there are booming non-denominational Bible churches, Korean congregations, charismatic Catholic conclaves, Spanish-language fellowships, Polish churches, Lubavitch Jews, and evangelical congregations of all sorts, most of them newly created and lacking the inherited resources of old mainline denominations. So they are forced to meet in high school auditoriums, old theaters, office parks, or converted strip malls. Tim Keller's own Redeemer Church worships underground in a rebuilt parking garage. And they are one of the most fortunate new church plants—others are forced to gather on Saturday, or at night, because they have no facility at all, and must eke along by renting space from a mainline church that owns its building. Ironically, many of these gypsy congregations are far larger and more active than the host congregations. But their real-estate inheritances don't match their religious states.

Until they have solid premises of their own—ideally ones with some ability to inspire the feeling of heaven-on-earth that worship aims to create a facsimile of—no church is really safe or stable. For that very reason, Keller has urged donors to help vibrant congregations buy a property. Owning is better stewardship than renting, and it roots the church. "When you rent you often have to move. What's disastrous for a church is to get to know a neighborhood and then be pushed out of it. A disaster," Keller warns.

Donors could also join together to form investment collaboratives and rotating capital funds that distribute grants and loans to many congregations in different places. Some of these monies might return to the pool via payback clauses, to be re-distributed to fresh congregations. This is exactly one of the models that donors have used to help charter schools take root, via pooled facilities funds.

Helping a shrinking and aging city congregation transfer its oversized premises to a more vibrant congregation could help the shrinking church as well as the growing one. Many dwindling parishes are burdened with properties that are too large and too costly for them to maintain, but they have no graceful way to get out from under them at present. In desperation, many overhoused congregations are selling their churches to developers to be remade into condos, restaurants, or bars. These sad conversions tripled in number nationwide between 2010 and 2015. Once a church is thus sold, it is unlikely that a similarly large and majestic space will ever again become available for public gatherings in that neighborhood.

Donors could provide purchase, closing, or renovation funds, and help hire technical assistance, regulatory guidance, and historic-preservation consultancy, so as to lubricate a reallocation of churches from religious communities that are waning to others that are waxing. That would reduce conversions or demolitions of local churches. And it would help both worshiping populations.

The burgeoning fellowships would be able to expand, add programs, and create exciting physical campuses where muscular religious practice and social healing can be revived in urban settings where they are most needed. Many of the ghost congregations, once relieved of the financial albatross of their inherited building, might recover their balance and nicely serve their membership niche. And buildings that are great social, cultural, and architectural assets to their neighborhoods would be saved from moldering deterioration.

Church buildings, suggests Tim Keller, “are a kind of public utility. Anywhere you’ve got a thriving church attended by people from the surrounding neighborhood, social capital is being created. It’s a big benefit to the community.” Improving the allocation and fullest use of America’s churches could be a worthy philanthropic project on many levels.

Opportunities for new philanthropic experiments

Funding new leaders, new programs, and new facilities that allow religious congregations to thrive and serve their neighborhoods will have clear philanthropic payoffs. Keller notes that “It took about \$200,000 to start Redeemer Church. Now Redeemer gives away millions of dollars outside of the congregation annually. It attracts many new followers who become important volunteers and workers for the rest of their lives. There was a man in the Midwest who gave \$50,000 as part of starting Redeemer. How many times have his philanthropic dollars been multiplied? In church planting, you can give \$1,000 and turn that into \$10,000 and then eventually \$100,000.”

Millions of small givers already loyally support their local congregations. Only a small number of larger foundations and individual donors, however, have recognized the societal value of thriving churches and synagogues, and acted to underwrite their creation, expansion, and improvement. Very little organized philanthropic funding has been directed to housing churches, improving the quality of their leaders, and enriching their programming.

One recent venture, though, incubated at the Philanthropy Roundtable, has experimented with the application of modern communications and marketing techniques to church work. It pooled donor funds and used them to subsidize microtargeting, social media, and high-quality advertising to encourage church attendance in test areas. This produced a 30 percent increase in Sunday worship attendance during its targeted month at 110 evangelical churches in the Dayton, Ohio, region. Similar tests to boost Catholic mass attendance had mixed results.

Another project funded by this “Culture of Freedom” initiative organized churches to offer marriage classes on a mass basis in three targeted cities. That attracted thousands of participants to one of several multi-hour programs offered by 15 different marriage-building nonprofits. The effort has been connected to double-digit percentage annual declines in divorces in two of the test cities—Dayton and Jacksonville, Florida.

A third effort funded by these Philanthropy Roundtable donors organized churches to hold employment fairs where job seekers and local companies could be united. The FlourishNow program recruited 805 business partners and hundreds of church volunteers, then booked church spaces that allowed 35 of these fairs to be held in the first two years. Thousands of job offers were extended to struggling individuals in this way, and many low-income people made their first connection to the host church.

One of the latest products growing out of this consortium of givers is an app and related subscription service that churches can buy on a sliding scale. These allow church leaders to study their neighborhood demographics and find people in need of assistance like language instruction, family reinforcement, drug counseling, and so forth. The software then prepares customized communications the church can send to individuals, offering relevant services available through that congregation.

Philanthropists willing to experiment will find lots of opportunities for helping churches grow, improve, and better serve their neighbors. If donors will fund a burst of social invention in this area, it is possible they could spark culture reforms as consequential as the charter-school and school-reform movements of the last generation. That might offer America a chance to reverse the troubling recent declines in religious participation—and to head off the nosedive in personal giving, volunteering, and service that is almost certain to follow.