Jane Eisner

Will the Decline in Faith Institutions Harm the Faith-Based Initiative?

Every night for more than 30 years, homeless men were able to find respite – a hot meal, clean sheets – in a small room on the second floor of Ansche Chesed, a synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. This was not a permanent shelter; the building was in use for prayer, nursery school, Hebrew school, and various community functions during the day. But every evening, up to ten men with no home of their own were welcomed into a safe, clean, and dignified environment to spend the night.

The shelter was operated by volunteers, most drawn from the congregation of this Conservative Jewish synagogue, of which I am a member; the rest came from nearby schools and universities. The synagogue received state and city funding over the years – reimbursements for fuel oil to heat the century-old building, to provide clean sheets and towels, and for a time, hot frozen dinners, until the money ran out and the food was supplied directly by congregants. Mostly, the shelter depended on volunteers, driven by the religious impulse embodied in the synagogue's name, Ansche Chesed, people of kindness.

"On Sunday nights, pre-pandemic, when it was zero degrees outside, I would go there and unlock the building, and it felt really good to do that," Josh Hanft, the synagogue's executive director, told me. "Being homeless is painful, and this was a good thing for people to do."

The key word here is "pre-pandemic." When New York City was overwhelmed by the first wave of the coronavirus in early 2020, the shelter closed and has remained closed. "It breaks my heart," Hanft said. "This is the neediest population, and we're not able to service them right now."

Eventually, the shelter will reopen, Hanft insisted. Undoubtedly, many of the other churches, synagogues, mosques and temples which provide services for New York City's soaring homeless population will also figure out how to safely resume their good work – aided, one hopes, by a renewed sense of mission modeled by the Biden administration. But that Faith-Based Initiative 5.0, as Stanley Carlson-Thies calls it, faces two, intertwined challenges: the dramatic urgency to serve a growing number of Americans in need, and an equally dramatic decline in religious affiliation, posing an existential threat to the very institutions upon which the faith-based initiative relies.

Fortunately, Ansche Chesed has a thriving membership. In this, it is not representative of many other Conservative synagogues around the country, a denomination that once was the largest in American Judaism, and is now struggling. Nor is my synagogue representative of other houses of worship of any faith, thousands of which are reportedly closing each year.

Jane Eisner

A Gallup poll at the end of March reported that in 2020 only 47% of Americans said they belong to a church, synagogue or mosque, dropping below 50% for the first time in the eight decades that Gallup has tracked this data. Put another way, less than half the American public belongs to a house of worship.

When Gallup first measured membership in 1937, 73% of Americans belonged, and the percentage remained near 70% for the next six decades. The decline began at the turn of the 21st century and steadily continued ever since. And even if this current dip was exacerbated by the lockdown imposed to contain COVID infections — why bother with membership if you can't attend church in person anyway? — that does not explain away the overall trend. As in so many features of contemporary life, the pandemic accelerated patterns already there — in this case, a growing distaste for or indifference to religious institutions.

Unsurprisingly, the decline in membership maps the increase in the number of Americans claiming no religious preference at all — the so-called "nones." But it also holds true for Americans describing themselves as religious. Between 1998 and 2000, Gallup said, an average of 73% of religious Americans belonged to a church, synagogue,or mosque. Over the past three years, that average has fallen to 60%.

And all these behaviors are much more pronounced among younger people, so we can't expect the trend lines to suddenly depart from their downward trajectory.

In a constitutional republic like ours, the drop in church membership should not necessarily affect public policy. It's not the government's job to fill the pews or the collection plate. But for those who believe that partnerships between government and faith institutions are an important avenue for delivering social services — with all the necessary guardrails to ensure that taxpayers aren't supporting religious coercion — then this trend presents a challenge. What if those very congregations are fading away? What if there are fewer churches running soup kitchens, or mosques providing job training, or synagogues sheltering the homeless? Who will government partner with then?

The more serious challenge is, of course, to the faith institutions themselves. To some extent, religion operates like a free market in America, and clearly, more and more people are not buying what is offered. The soul-searching that is happening in emptying synagogues across the country is, I'm sure, replicated in churches and mosques, too. The pandemic experiment of holding prayer services, study groups, and choir practice online offers some hope for renewal, by lowering the bar to access and encouraging creative alternatives. But there's no evidence yet that going digital will foster lasting spiritual and communal attachments.

Demographic trends suggest there is good reason to be anxious about the future. Millennials, we are told, are not joiners. But they are doers. So here is my modest

proposal: all major faiths share an imperative to aid the poor and needy. In Judaism, *gemilut chasadim* – deeds of loving-kindness – are on par with Torah study and prayer, a three-legged stool upon which, the saying goes, the world stands. That value is held in Christianity and Islam just as deeply.

What if the post-pandemic, post-modern faith-based initiative is propelled not by government policy, but from the ground up? Forty percent of Americans consider themselves religious but don't belong to any faith institution; among Millennials, it's 50%. Surely some of them can be enlisted to do what they likely consider to be God's work, in partnership with government and faith institutions, even if they reject the other trappings of religious affiliation. Outreach can be tempered with tolerance, if the aim is to enlist not necessarily more true believers, but more compassionate citizens.

The work is already being done in institutions across the country; one could argue this is simply a matter of branding and marketing. But it's more than that. It demands a grander pivot, a re-focus of American religious life away from the extreme politicization of recent years and towards a genuine engagement with the needs of the world outside the sanctuary doors.

Until now, it seems to me, much of the conversation about this initiative revolves around how and under what conditions can faith institutions secure government funding for what they are already doing in their communities. What if instead the responsibility for partnership first lies with the individual faith institutions, to demonstrate how their religious values propel the sort of actions, and results, deserving of taxpayer funding and, one hopes, communal support?

This could lead to a Faith-Based Initiative 6.0, if you will – in which Americans who already consider themselves religious embrace service to their communities as a feature of their faith, creating more partners for government and more good done in the world.

Jane Eisner is Director of Academic Affairs at the Columbia University School of Journalism. For more than a decade, she was the editor-in-chief of the Forward, America's foremost national Jewish news organization.