

In Good Faith



Thomas Quiggle

Building Involvement in Seasons of Service

■ BY KATE JOSEPHINE MCGILL

People of faith are a significant part of any community. They are the single most available group of volunteers in your community, and because of their faith tradition, they are likely predisposed to serve. Barbara Cheaney, Join Hands Day coordinator for Catholic Life Insurance, has had success with uniting congregations and people of faith in Join Hands Day events in San Antonio and surrounding south Texas towns.

“The faith community is an untapped resource,” says Cheaney. “Faith communities are organized; the congregants know each other; they have their own networks. If you can turn on 10% of the congregants, you will have a greater chance of the interest spreading within the whole congregation.”

The Seasons of Service (SOS) Days are a great way to engage the faith community. They work well with organizations and volunteers

who need flexibility in their projects. The SOS Days are well established and there are plenty of resources available to guide you in planning these service days.

Faith Basics

Partnering with congregations and faith groups has its challenges, as is the case with most partnerships. Here are some ways to make it easier.

- **Involve the congregation leader.** Carl Swearson, Martin Luther King Day project coordinator in St. Louis, Mo., emphasized the importance of working with the congregational leadership. “You really need to go through the leader of the congregation. If you try to skirt around him or her, you create more problems in the long run. But if you receive a ‘no,’ try to find an open door. Get someone on the inside to catch the vision and work on your behalf to convince the minis-

ter to partner on your project.”

- **Appreciate and emphasize the mutual benefits of the partnership.** Involve the congregation leaders in choosing and planning the project. “Members of our Fraternal Benefit Society talk to local priests and ask what needs to be done in the community,” says Cheaney. And JHD coordinators remind religious leaders when project volunteers from outside the congregation have a positive experience, they take away a positive impression of the congregation. Partnering with congregations brings benefits to the outside project coordinator and to the places of worship.

- **Engage the lay leadership.** Josh Protas, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council in Tucson, Ariz., has found that lay leadership is essential to successful partnerships. “Make A Difference Day projects are good because they have room for people at all

levels to get involved. Participation and buy-in by all levels of congregation membership is important.”

One-Time Events

Mariah Neuroth from the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) in Chicago, has had some experience partnering with different faith communities for Martin Luther King Day and other one-time service events. These one-time events can sometimes be just the event to cause volunteers to make life-long commitments to volunteering and service. On occasion, you might encounter a congregation that is extremely interested in volunteering in the community. “They might be really interested in your Seasons of Service Day and are disappointed that it is a one-time thing. It is important for the organizing group to have ongoing opportunities to also offer to the congregants, or provide them with contact information of groups that do.” Each congregation and its membership will have different needs. Listen closely to the volunteering needs of the congregants.

Carl Swearson suggests soliciting help and advice from someone or an organization that has done a Seasons of Service project and asking for their expertise. “It is always good to use organizations that are already established, like Service for Peace, the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Points of Light Foundation.” America’s Fraternal Benefit Societies, Youth Service America, and USA Weekend Magazine are other organizations that sponsor these Seasons of Service.

Faith groups need to see the

Maximizing the Interfaith Component

Partnering among groups with different faith backgrounds offers additional rewards. Interfaith partnerships are valuable both for the work that is done and the relationships that are developed in the process. “The real power of faith-based volunteering is in interfaith efforts. People of different religious backgrounds working side-by-side allow them to break down stereotypes and see each

ter society through service.” For their 2003 interfaith MLK Day project, student volunteers from a number of different faith groups read books to immigrant children, painted the walls of the Vietnamese Association of Illinois, and painted an “I Have A Dream” mural for the South East Asian Center. This type of interfaith service provided a safe setting for interaction of diverse populations.



Photo courtesy of Interfaith Youth Core, Chicago

The best faith-based service projects include a time of reflection. Encourage volunteers to use the day of service to stimulate dialogue among members about what their religion says about service. Josh Protas says, “We begin our Make A Difference Day with a kick-off

During MLK Day of Interfaith Youth Service in Chicago, students learn value of hospitality by serving local refugee and immigration agencies.

other as human beings,” says Josh Protas.

Based in Chicago, The Interfaith Youth Core uses MLK Day to make young people scholars of their own service experiences. Mariah Neuroth says, “IFYC works with youth because in this country, young people of different traditions are going to interact. That interaction will happen one of two ways—positively or negatively. We want to create an alternative to negative interaction by constructing a place and safe space for inter-religious interaction that ultimately builds a bet-

breakfast. Last year, a rabbi talked about the Jewish idea of Tikkun Olan which literally means ‘healing and repairing the world’. This Jewish religious ideal informs the participation in the day. But it is a very universal concept that fits well with Make A Difference Day—making a difference in your world.” IFYC uses quotes from Jewish, Muslim, Jain, Hindu, Baha’i, Christian, Buddhist and Sikh religious texts to direct conversation about each religion’s position on service. The participants generally notice a high degree of similarity in the teachings on service.

value added to their own missions. The Luter Family YMCA in Smithfield, Va., had success partnering with faith-based organizations that had similar community interests for National Family Volunteer Day (NFVD). Project coordinator Connie Chapman says, “We partnered with a local parochial school who wanted to have a food drive. The students and the YMCA collected food for a month prior to NFVD. Then families gathered to organize the food and distribute it to local seniors who fall between the cracks of the government food programs.” The local food pantry, also a faith-based organization, reaps some of the benefits of the food drive as well. The project



Photo courtesy of Interfaith Youth Core, Chicago

During Martin Luther King Day of Interfaith Youth Service in Chicago, students create a mural at a community center to enact their commitment to hospitality toward a stranger.

coordinators ensure that any leftover food baskets are given to the food pantry to distribute to their constituents. This is just one of

countless examples of a successful partnership between multiple groups on a Seasons of Service Day.

There is no better time than now to begin working with the faith community on a Seasons of Service Day to take that initial step down the path of sustained partnership. One pastor says, “If you want to walk in the steps of Dr. King you must do unto others as you would have people do unto you.” ♦

Kate Josephine McGill, an AmeriCorps VISTA worker at the Points of Light Foundation, works with faith-based volunteers across the nation.

Want to Know More?

The Faith Initiative at the Points of Light Foundation seeks to engage more people of faith in more and better service. Email mfarr@pointsoflight.org or call Reverend Mark Farr, Senior Director for Faith Initiatives, at 202-729-8026 for more information about working with faith-based organizations, congregations of all faiths, and individuals in the faith community.

Save the Date

Martin Luther King Day

Jan. 17, 2005
Make It a Day On—
Not a Day Off
Sponsors: Corporation
for National and
Community Service and
the Points of Light
Foundation
www.mlkday.org or
[www.pointsoflight.org/
networks/faith/](http://www.pointsoflight.org/networks/faith/)

National Youth Service Day

April 15-17, 2005
The Power of Youth
Serving Youth
Sponsors: Youth Service
America, National Youth
Leadership Council, and
Parade magazine
www.ysa.org/nysd/

National Volunteer Week

April 17-23, 2005
Inspire by Example:

Celebrate and
Recognize the Efforts of
Volunteers
Sponsor: Points of Light
Foundation
[www.pointsoflight.org/
programs/seasons/nvw/](http://www.pointsoflight.org/programs/seasons/nvw/)

Join Hands Day

May 7, 2005
Youth and Adults
Volunteering Together
Sponsors: America's
Fraternal Benefit
Societies and the Points
of Light Foundation
www.joinhandsday.org

One Day's Pay

Sept. 11, 2005
Honoring the victims of
the 9/11 terrorist attacks
through community ser-
vice
Sponsor: One Day's Pay
www.onedayspay.org

Kids Care Week

Oct. 16-22, 2005
Celebrate Kids Making a
Difference in Their
Community
Sponsor: Points of Light
Foundation
www.kidscare.org

Make A Difference Day

Oct. 22, 2005
The National Day of
Doing Good
Sponsors: USA Weekend
Magazine and Points of
Light Foundation
[www.makeadifference-
day.com](http://www.makeadifference-day.com)

National Family Volunteer Day

Nov. 19, 2005
My Family Matters—We
Volunteer!
Sponsor: Points of Light
Foundation
[www.pointsoflight.org/
programs/seasons/nfv/](http://www.pointsoflight.org/programs/seasons/nfv/)