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Faith groups still support causes for the greater good

Groups reach far beyond their congregations to help



Ron Csillag

A remarkable new study confirms what many of us have long suspected: houses of worship are at the frontlines of social service provision in this province.

The study shows that on average, each religious congregation surveyed contributed a minimum of about \$145,000 a year toward social services in its respective community.

But the survey shows something else too: the recipients of congregations' largesse and energies are four times more likely to be unaffiliated with them than affiliated. In other words, the benevolence overwhelmingly favours secular programs over religious ones.

Described as the first of its kind in Canada by its co-author, York University environmental studies professor Femida Handy, the study surveyed 46 religious congregations in Toronto, Kingston and London, Ont., representing the major faith groups. It focused on the range of non-religious services they offer in their communities.

Among those were counselling for families, senior citizens programs, programs for

youth and the poor, as well as educational programs and arts and cultural programs.

... just because buildings disappear doesn't mean people and their values will.

More than 75 percent of the congregations dispensed food, clothing and international relief. (I hate to sound like the guy who sees the glass as half-empty, but if 75 per cent of religious congregations are doing this, what are the other 25 per cent doing?)

More than half offered soup kitchens, services for the homeless, shelters for men, women and children (likely under the Out of the Cold program) and hospital visitation.

Although all the congregations helped finance programs

and devoted staff time to such community services, their major contributions were volunteer hours donated and the provision of space.

The study mirrors a 1998 study by Volunteer Canada and the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy that showed church members are the largest financial supporters of non-religious charities and that they provide such charities with the majority of volunteer services.

The 32 per cent of Canadians who are religiously active provide 50 per cent of all the hours volunteered and 65 per cent of all charitable donations; the earlier study found.

A summary of the later study was recently presented to members of Parliament and senators by church groups lobbying for federal help in paying for potentially crippling residential school lawsuits. Many churches fear if the lawsuits force them to sell off buildings, their charitable work would suffer.

I'm with Gordon Floyd, vice-president of the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, who says that just because buildings disappear doesn't mean people and their values will.

Thornhill resident Ron Csillag writes about religious and spirituality issues. He can be reached at csillag@home.com

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