Paved with good intentions: The politics of national service

by Douglas A. Hicks in the July 31, 2002 issue

Last January President Bush announced that he was building on “a magnificent, courageous and compassionate response to terrorism” with the creation of the USA Freedom Corps, an initiative that combines the AmeriCorps, Senior Corps and Peace Corps. Then he added a new organization, the Citizens Corps, which will focus on prevention of and emergency response to terrorism. The president is calling on Americans to support him by giving at least two years or 4,000 hours of service in their lifetimes. The initiative, if approved by Congress, will cost about $1 billion annually, with $560 million of that money going to new expenditures.

I see the good done by volunteer service every time I teach “Service to Society,” a course in which undergraduates venture off campus to serve people in the Richmond community. In class we discuss concepts such as charity, justice, service and community, with students sharing the social problems that they’ve discovered through their volunteer work. I have seen that service coupled with critical reflection can transform both those who are served and those who serve. Some students even reconfigure their understandings of career and vocation.

The potential good of voluntary service, however, should not mask its complexities or problems. Persons of faith, in particular, have good reason to be skeptical when a political leader employs the language of service. They know that there is both promise and peril in raising the public profile of voluntary service. President Bush has called upon religious communities to play a major role in promoting his initiatives. But religious communities should respond by carefully assessing the Freedom Corps and the current public interest in service.

First of all, it is important to note the distinction between intentions and outcomes. Well-intentioned volunteers are not always well-qualified ones, and social-service agencies and people in need benefit most from the service of trained, dependable people. In a speech titled “To Hell with Good Intentions,” Catholic social critic Ivan

Illich once admonished a group of U.S. volunteers headed to Mexico to fight poverty. His point was strong and clear. The young Americans meant well, but they did not have the background, the perseverance or the will to face the systemic factors that contributed to Mexicans' deprivation. Although the U.S. volunteers had received training to avoid culture shock, Illich said, the Mexican recipients had received little protection to shield them from the onslaught of U.S. values of individualism and materialism that the volunteers would unintentionally but inevitably bring with them.

Many volunteers offer help with the best of intentions yet fail to address the needs of their recipients. I tell my students what they often do not wish to hear: it is possible to do more harm than good. Volunteer mentors may sign up, for example, to befriend a boy or a girl. But often the new mentor fails to keep an appointment or drops out of the program after a few months. When their lives get busy, volunteers often drop their service commitment, and add to the disappointments that the child has experienced.

On this point, President Bush is correct. Most volunteers could benefit from an organized program that encourages self-discipline and coordinates the overall effort. It is not obvious, however, that keeping a journal or "record of service" will help increase commitment. A better move would be to fund federal, state and local programs to identify nonprofit agencies that accept volunteers, and then to fund those agencies to train, supervise and support volunteers.

Second, people of faith must ask, "Service for what?" What is the goal of the USA Freedom Corps when its programs address three such disparate ends: international aid (Peace Corps), homeland security (Citizens Corps) and community rebuilding (AmeriCorps and Senior Corps)? The first answer to the "service for what?" question is that the Freedom Corps initiative is attempting to stitch a seamless new entity from goals that may or may not fit together well. Imagine the different attitudes and actions of two volunteers in a local neighborhood. One is charged to promote a sense of community; the other is assigned to report on suspicious people as part of terrorism prevention. Perhaps these goals can be held in constructive tension, but it is not difficult to see that they could often work at cross-purposes.

President Bush states that the Freedom Corps is part of the wider national goal of responding to "the evil of the terrorist attacks." More specifically, he asserts that service can help Americans show "the evil ones [who] thought we were weak" that America is strong and compassionate. People of faith must be alert to when the

rhetoric of service is appropriated to serve national interests.

To be sure, the Peace Corps, born in the Kennedy era of cold-war geopolitics, has fit within the enlightened self-interest of the United States. But we should express concern when Bush suggests that Peace Corps workers should go into Afghanistan and elsewhere in “the Islamic world” in order to demonstrate what a great and compassionate nation America is. His rhetoric does little to convince citizens of those nations that the U.S. is not arrogant or paternalistic. More to the point, his patriotic proselytism defies the notion that service should be undertaken most centrally not for the benefit of the server but for the one who is served.

Another danger is that the recent focus on service will politicize it. President Bush’s initiative joins others made by senators from both parties, including Evan Bayh of Indiana and John McCain of Arizona. The director of the new corps is John Bridgeland, former domestic policy adviser for Bush and a longtime Republican aide. As Bush introduced the Freedom Corps in a special event in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, he added an endorsement of Elizabeth Dole for the Senate.

Alexis de Tocqueville noted that one great virtue of moral and voluntary associations is that they are organized independently from the political process—and government funding. He saw religion as “the first of America’s political institutions,” but he issued a strong caution against too-direct involvement of religious congregations or clergy in political affairs. Political-religious entanglement is a problem not so much for the effects on the political process as for the effects on religious leaders and congregations. A similar caution is in order when the rhetoric of service is employed as a political tool.

We have reason to be suspicious of politicians’ motives when they tout the benefits of service even as they dismantle the government-sponsored social-safety net. Politicians downplay one important fact: the scale of those government-run social-service programs dwarfs all of the efforts made by private agencies and citizens. In the mid-1990s, says economist Rebecca Blank, the federal welfare system spent an estimated $77 billion. If religious congregations assumed this burden, they would each have to spend an additional $300,000 annually. (The congregations with which I am familiar do not have this kind of spare change.) Compare this $77 billion figure, which has been drastically cut since 1996, to the $1 billion proposed to support service programs.

We are right to be skeptical when politicians tout the value of voluntary service, for they downplay the factors involved in choosing “voluntary” service. The Latin *voluntas* means “of one’s free will,” deliberate and intentional. We Christians, for example, articulate our motivation to serve as part of our faith, and believe that we are *called* to service. The Freedom Corps Web site appropriates this religious image of call but fails to elaborate on the implications of that call.

For Christians, the term “service” is related to “servant” and “servitude,” and has to do with where our ultimate commitment lies. We do not simply “do 4,000 hours” of service, putting in time as an end in itself. We act out of faith, and become, as Paul said, “slaves of Christ.” This requires shaping the will through hard work in prayer and worship. When leadership experts, civics scholars and politicians seem surprised to discover the merits of service, Christians are not surprised but point to the texts and traditions that tell how acts of compassion shape a commitment to service, justice and peace. This kind of intentionality is central to effective service.

Finally, Christians temper the rhetoric of public volunteer work with humility. H. Richard Niebuhr spoke of Christian distinctiveness not as election to special status or privilege, but as election to service. He reminded us that our ultimate loyalty or commitment must be to God, who stands above and beyond human history but who is also active within it. Humans can become transformers of culture, but our efforts to serve others should always be undertaken modestly and with humility. God is at work, both through and despite our own efforts, to transform the world for good.

This emphasis on humility is not reflected in President Bush’s call to “overcome evil by greater good.” To believe that the American way (or the way of any human institution) is going to defeat evil by doing good suggests either naïveté or hubris. In one of my classes, a student recalled that Bush has called his fellow Americans “to rid the world of evil,” and noted that not even Jesus accomplished this goal in his lifetime.

Given that our ultimate loyalty is to God, our respective commitments to different groups and institutions (including the church as well as the state) must be penultimate at best. When President Bush devises an initiative on service with the express goal of making us either better Americans or better supporters of his politics, we risk losing our critical stance as Christians. And even when we are engaged in charitable giving and service, we must maintain a critical distance from government so that we (and other citizens) can press government to maintain the

basic structures of social justice.

Bob Dylan observes that “everybody’s gotta serve somebody.” As we reflect upon any particular act of service, whether as part of a church program, a neighborhood group or the Citizens Corps, Christians should ask if the “somebody” who is ultimately being served is God.

These reflections suggest that we should neither discount the transformative potential of service nor view it as a cure-all. Whatever the social goal—to overcome terrorism, build local communities or develop an equitable world order—service can accomplish only so much. The government, the market, civil society and other institutions also have important roles in a good and just society.

Christians should work with the president and with other politicians and business and civic leaders when they show a genuine commitment to service that can improve the lives of persons in need. But we also need a critical distance from them. When we form provisional coalitions, insist on social justice and persevere in work with people in need, our actions will contribute to faithful and effective Christian service. But we expect no panacea, and know that an active, critical and energetic social engagement will require intense commitment.