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The Potential of Faith-Based Community Organizations
An Interview with Associate Professor Mark Warren

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Associate Professor Mark R. Warren is a sociologist concerned with the revitalization of American democratic and community life. He studies efforts to strengthen institutions that anchor inner city

Associate Professor Mark Warren
(Karlyn Morissette photo)

communities—churches, schools and other community-based organizations—and to build broad-based alliances among these institutions and across race and social class. Warren is interested in the development of community leaders through involvement in multiracial political action as well as the outcomes of such efforts in fostering community development, social justice, and school transformation and is committed to using the results of scholarly research to advance democratic practice.

Q: Why do you think religious institutions tend to provide effective sites for community organization? How can these institutions allow for the cultivation and acceptance of a diversity of ideas?

A: First of all, faith institutions are there. Every community has at least one, and many have a large variety of churches, mosques, and synagogues. After the declines of the 1970s and 1980s, churches are one of the only institutions left standing in many inner-city communities. And large numbers of Americans participate in these institutions. Around 40%

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Audio Selections about the Research
(RealPlayer required)

Some excerpts from a recent interview with Mark Warren about his research into faith-based community organizations are included here:

◀) Mark Warren on the diversity of most faith-based organizations (1 minute)
 listen   need help?

◀) Warren on schools and their relationship to community organizing (1 minute) listen   need help?

◀) Warren explains the importance of the neighborhood to community development (1 minute) listen   need help?

◀) Warren on involving schools in cultivating community democracy (1 minute) listen   need help?

of all Americans say they attend religious service on a weekly basis. Moreover, while other forms of civic participation are top-heavy, with more educated and affluent Americans exercising greater influence, faith communities are strikingly egalitarian. Low-income folks and people of color join and support faith institutions as much—if not more so—than Americans generally do.

In addition, religious institutions contain rich traditions that call their members to care for each other and the broader community, and to work for social justice. Of course, not all churches put these traditions into practice, but a surprisingly large number do so. As a result, churchgoers on average volunteer more, give more to charity, and join community associations more frequently. People sometimes forget that churches anchored many of the most important movements for social justice in America, an obvious example being the civil rights movement.

Churchgoers can be narrow-minded, and churches can try to impose their moral vision on others. But experience reveals that when people of faith engage in the broader public life of their communities, they come into contact with a variety of views and very often learn to open their minds to these new views. The faith-based community organizing groups I study try very hard to be interfaith and multiracial, in order to effectively bring people together across the urban/suburban divide. This is pretty rare in our largely segregated society, and the resultant mix of people and ideas is powerful.

Q: What are some of the ways in which faith-based organizing groups have been able to promote democratic principles? How does the importance that these groups place on democracy affect the actions of their community leaders?

A: Faith-based organizing groups stand out as one of the few venues through which people actively involve themselves in political efforts that benefit their communities: building affordable housing, developing job-training programs, promoting effective and just law enforcement, expanding afterschool programs, and reforming failing public schools. Our world of advocacy group politics is so narrow, with a small group of professionals in Washington or state capitals lobbying on behalf of a passive, paper membership. By contrast, faith-based organizing groups typically have hundreds of people working to advance policy initiatives that meet their community needs. The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, for example, brought over 3,000 people to its meeting to get the Massachusetts state legislature to set up a $100 million housing trust fund.

"Faith-based organizing groups represent a different aspect of faith-based politics, one that can engage people not as passive recipients of social services, but as active agents for their community's development."

Faith-based organizations reach out through faith institutions to engage people in discussions and actions that relate to their values. This refers not to moral strictures derived from the Bible, but rather to faith-informed discussions about the practical challenges of raising families and sustaining communities. President Bush's Faith Based Initiative recognizes the important foundation(s) that religious institutions can bring to civil society. But his proposal, whatever its legal merits, is about the provision of services. Faith-based organizing groups represent a different

aspect of faith-based politics, one that can engage people not as passive recipients of social services, but as active agents for their community's development.

Q: Why is HGSE a good match for a sociologist whose research interests lie in community development and social justice?

A: Education lies at the heart of the promise of American democracy. Yet far too many Americans attend and/or interact with failed schools that reinforce their position at the bottom of the barrel, that consign them to a future on the margins of society. How can someone fully participate in democratic life if they are not given the opportunity to understand the complex issues facing our society, if they cannot earn enough to support themselves and their families? Education, in my view, lies on the frontline of the battle for social justice in America today.

From a community development point of view, we can ask, "What sense does it make to build good housing in the inner city if no one with any real option would want to send their children to the neighborhood's schools?" Conversely, can we reasonably expect to rebuild our urban school systems if the communities around them remain plagued by poverty and decay? Common sense suggests the need for partnerships between schools and community-building initiatives, such as those that come out of faith-based community organizing.

We could build affordable housing for all Americans if we could muster the political will to do so. The same can't necessarily be said of education. Creating urban schools that work for everyone requires the political will to address the profound inequalities in resources devoted to inner city schools, but it requires more than that. We need creative partnerships between energized teachers, collaborative school leaders, engaged parents, active communities, concerned businesses, and motivated youth. This is an organizing issue, one that seeks to transform failing schools through an active collaboration involving the energy, ideas, commitment, and hard work of all Americans who truly care about the future of our children.

For More Information
More information about Mark Warren is available in the Faculty Profiles.

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