



# President's Letter

## Being Good for Nothing

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By Gary Reierson

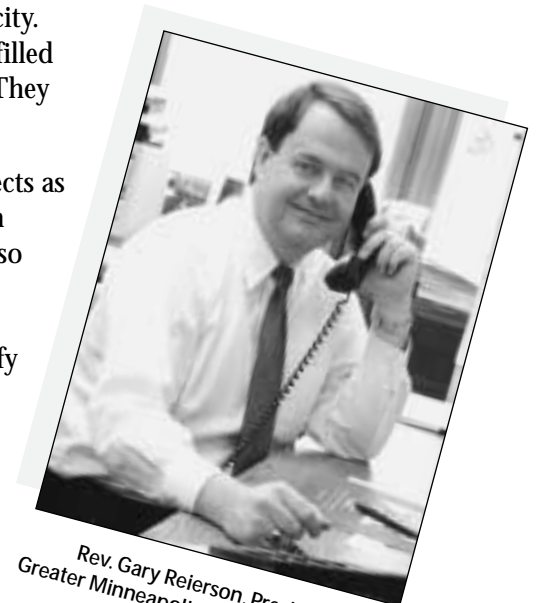
As the leader for over eleven years of an ecumenical agency whose mission is to mobilize its 700 member congregations and 30,000 volunteers to serve human need and seek social justice, I have long pondered and often been asked why people volunteer to serve their fellow human beings. To put the question simply: why do good?

In particular, why do good in the face of what many church members see as unrelenting evil confronting them daily on the television and in the newspaper — across the globe in places like eastern Europe and Africa where the genocidal hatreds of seemingly countless people are acted out against historic foes. Or in core American cities where gangs and drugs and guns appear to have the upper hand and to be unstoppable. Even our schools in inner-city neighborhoods are using metal detectors and security guards, people note.

The magnitude of evil forces at large in the world give rise to expressions of despair and doubt by clergy and congregants alike. A February 20, 2000 article in the *Minneapolis StarTribune* reported on how fear prevents many people from Twin Cities' suburbs from ever going into the inner cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. A geography professor from one of the local colleges offered this analysis: "Fear is one of the reasons that people won't explore, particularly fear of the core city. Those fears are fed by media that suggest the cities are filled with guns, drug dealers, human parasites and pirates. They fuel racial fears too."

Misapprehensions are rampant in other, related subjects as well: Why, some ask, is there still poverty and hunger in inner cities across the country when unemployment is so very low and employers are begging for workers to fill vacancies? Our cities, some say, are filled with lazy, unmotivated people who turn to a life of crime to satisfy their sadistic desires and need for ready cash.

Others, less likely to judge or condemn those they do not know, nevertheless feel quite helpless to do anything about it. The problems seem well entrenched, and the scope makes even large, well-organized efforts appear futile.



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*The Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches (GMCC) is a 78-year-old nonprofit organization that operates more than 10 programs to help struggling Minnesota families living with little. GMCC is Metro Paint-A-Thon, Minnesota FoodShare, Project Restoration, HandyWorks, the Division of Indian Work, Urban Immersion Service Retreats, and many other social service initiatives.*

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THE GMCC PRESIDENT'S LETTER  
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Nonprofit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Mpls. MN  
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3772

Yet, in spite of the fear, misapprehensions, and helplessness people feel about evil and about people different from themselves, I have watched, over the past several years, a dramatic increase in church members stepping forward to "do good" to, for, and with their neighbors. In fact, the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches has experienced such a rise in this volunteerism that we have built a Center for Urban Service to house, train, and place them in service. Over 7,000 church members — most of them young people — from 11 different states all across the Upper Midwest have responded in just the past two years. Why? Is this new? Are there some changing themes of church life driving the increase? Are churches looking more outward again after a period of greater introspection?

In a sense, the churches (and synagogues and mosques) are being rediscovered as an enormous power of good in society. Government leaders, including both the Democratic and Republican candidates for president in this year's election, are calling for greater investment by all levels of government in church-related social services, even with local congregations. Perhaps after decades of self-evaluated failure by government to address social issues successfully, religious institutions are seen as the best — maybe even the last — hope for solving entrenched social problems.

Congregations also bring to any situation a huge resource that other sectors of our society are lacking: volunteers. The capacity to address a societal issue — even one of considerable magnitude — is dramatically increased when one has at one's disposal vast and committed people power.

A good example of the leveraging that occurs through the use of volunteers in the Minneapolis area is the Council's Paint-A-Thon. Between 1984 and 1999, 4,708 homes of low-income elderly and disabled people have been painted by volunteers from congregations and businesses. During this time the annual budget had grown to only \$220,000 a year (less than \$1.2 million for all 16 years combined). When you add 6,000 volunteers at painters' rates plus 75,000 gallons of donated paint, the total is \$25 million. A total cash outlay of \$1.2 million becomes \$25 million of community good. And this calculation does not include the cost saving for society in helping low-income older adults remain independent in their homes instead of a \$150 to \$250 per day nursing home cost. Nor does it include the incalculable value to neighborhoods in having their paint-peeling homes given a coat of fresh paint or to homeowners in having their only major asset preserved and enhanced.

Something happens when people encounter each other in person too. Personal relationships, even for a brief while, can shatter misperceptions and build powerful forces for good. Rolling up one's sleeves alongside someone else to work together on a difficult project, even if that someone is very different from one's self, can create community. The synergy of that created community can serve as an effective weapon against seemingly evil forces.

Strategies for church growth are picking up on this force for building community as well. Instead of focusing more "internally" in congregational life, on small groups and spirituality, the view now is more "external": on mission and service projects. The irony, of course, is that the external focus in church life often produces an even greater internal growth and strength. The community created out of an effort to work together for the common good can be very resilient to forces of evil and despair. For the church and for society as a whole, this shift from internal to external focus is one of the most encouraging signs I see in contemporary church life. Clergy who can encourage this trend and work to organize groups within their congregations to engage in service and mission projects will discover, I think, both a powerful tool for community building and a force for enabling their congregants to take action in the face of human suffering.

People from many of our faith communities are also still open and willing to try to understand those they do not. When Monday comes, and they return to their places of work or school or leisure, their skepticism may return as well, but for a little while at least, when sitting in the pews or when gathering

with others from the pews to engage in a work project together, the possibility is there of people trying to understand that the injured person at the side of the road is truly our neighbor.

There is, I think, an authentic curiosity about our neighbor. Is the life portrayed on television and in the newspaper a genuine depiction of real lives? Are the people who live in America's core cities really that different from ourselves? What motivates and inspires their lives? Is there something I can learn from these neighbors, perhaps about facing struggles or enduring difficulties, or about loving others or relishing the varieties of experience that compose urban life?

We come again to the question I put out at the beginning: Why do good? What is it in us that prompts us to reach out to a struggling neighbor and try to help? Social scientists, particularly psychologists and sociologists, are helpful in learning about human motivation and behavior. Theologians can describe our quest for heaven or our flight from punishment. None of these, however, helps me to understand the dramatic increase I am seeing in church members stepping forward to do good.

The British novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch observed that most analysis of moral action in the past fifty years has focused on act and choice and not enough on waiting and attention. Like Simone Weil before her, Murdoch seeks to inspire people to just see — really see — and to understand others and the circumstances in which they find themselves. ("Attention is our daily bread," Murdoch once wrote.) This is what I note in the volunteers coming to our Center for Urban Service: a willingness to understand, to be open, to set aside judgment long enough to let stereotypes evaporate, to just see people for themselves in a mutual quest for good.

Our staff members ask church volunteers when they arrive (and also when they leave), Why are people poor? One of the most heartening things they experience in their work with volunteers is how the answers change in between. The willingness to give focused attention and to risk real relationships with people different from themselves is a powerful force for good in the face of evil.

Iris Murdoch's novels portray how immensely difficult, but nevertheless crucial, it is to be or do good in a world which seems to be increasingly mad. And so she asks, in *The Sovereignty of Good*, "Are we not certain that . . . goodness really matters? (p. 60)". Little wonder then that the Divinity School at the University of Chicago sponsored a conference in the early 1990s to investigate and celebrate the theological importance of Murdoch's novels because she was one of the few noted contemporary novelists to take religion seriously.

Finally, for Murdoch, we desire to do good not to seek eternal reward or to avoid eternal punishment but because of the independent imperative which calls us to be moral and good. "The only genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing' . . ." (*The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 71). This requires an effort to give real attention to others and away from self. In the often self-centered rush of ordinary life, that is not easy. It demands a kind of "unselfing," in Murdoch's view.

Basil the Great put it similarly: "If we turn away from evil out of fear of punishment, we are in the position of slaves. If we pursue the enticement of wages, . . . we resemble mercenaries. Finally, if we obey for the sake of the good itself and out of love for him who commands, . . . we are in the position of children of God."

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