

# Faith Communities: Untapped Allies in Service-Learning

by Eugene C. Roehlkepartain



While a great deal of attention has been paid to the growth of youth service and service-learning in public education, another important area of growth has been largely overlooked within the movement: The growing commitment to youth engagement in serving others through their church, synagogue, mosque, parish, or other congregation.

Though there is anecdotal information about the scope and quality of congregation-based service-learning, fairly little research has examined this field. What we do know suggests that the faith community has embraced service as a core programming area for youth work, but that it has yet to embrace many of the principles and practices of effective service-learning. This article highlights the current scope, nature, and challenges of youth service within the faith community and suggests directions for further research, learning, and collaboration.

## The Scope of Faith-Based Service

According to Independent Sector surveys, religious institutions provide a significant

number of the volunteer activities for young people, and they are an important "entry point" for volunteer activities. Among young people who volunteer, 53 percent first learned about volunteer activities through their congregation. In comparison, 50 percent learned about activities through their school, 22 percent through a youth organization, 20 percent through a community group, and 47 percent through other settings. (Youth identified where they learned about each of their activities, thus many young people gave multiple answers.)

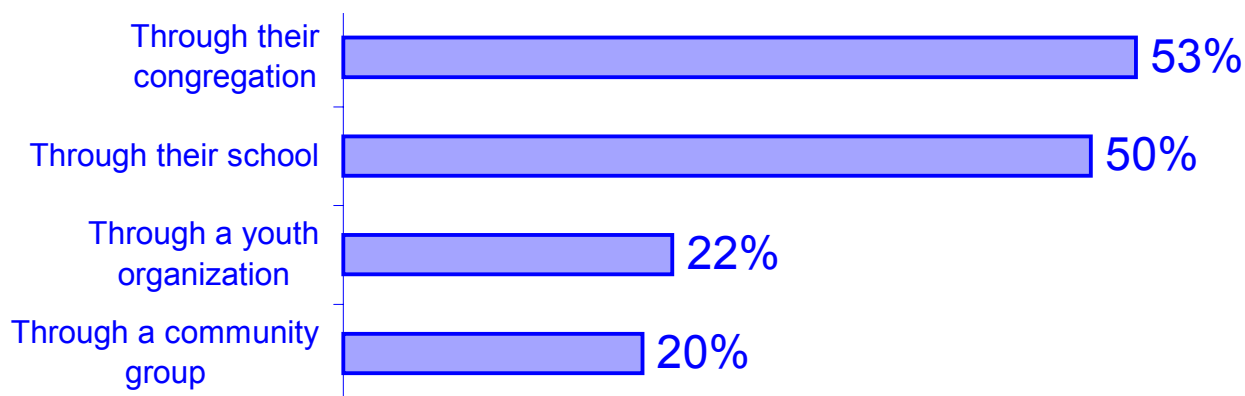
It is important to note that much of the volunteer activity that young people learn about through their congregation is to provide services within the congregation. Twenty-four percent of all young people's volunteer assignments "in the past month" were activities within a congregation, such as participating in a choir, teaching religious classes, or being an aide to a clergyperson. However, young people also say that they get involved in a variety of other volunteer activities through their congregation, including human services and youth development. And 31 percent of volunteer

assignments in human service organizations came through congregations, as did 18 percent of assignments in youth development organizations.

We also know that religious youth are almost twice as likely to engage in service as those who are not active in a faith community. Search Institute surveys of 217,000 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade youth during the 1999-2000 school year found that 60 percent of young people who attend services, programs, or other activities in a "church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious or spiritual place" at least one hour per week also say they serve in the community at least an hour a week. In contrast, only 36 percent of young people who are not active in a faith community are engaged in service to others at that same level. These findings are consistent with analyses of Monitoring the Future data on 12<sup>th</sup>-grade youth that show significant positive correlations between service and religious participation, even controlling for race, age, gender, rural/urban residence, region, parental education, number of siblings, and presence of father/male guardian in the household.

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## How Do Young People Learn About Volunteer Activities?



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In addition, Independent Sector found that only 40 percent of young people with no religious affiliation volunteer. However, 60 percent of Protestant Christian youth volunteered, compared to 63 percent of Catholic youth and 74 percent of youth affiliated with other religious traditions, including Judaism. While these levels of youth engagement do not tell us where religious youth engage in service-learning, they do point to a strong link between faith or spirituality and a commitment to serving others—a link that other researchers have examined in great detail.

Finally, we know that many congregations of all faiths are active in providing a range of social services, and we can speculate that young people are involved in many of these. A national study of 14,301 congregations of all faiths found both consistency and diversity in the types of social services that congregations offer (see Table 1).

### Congregation-Sponsored Service Activities

We have already noted that congregations are a significant “entry point” for youth to get involved in volunteering and community service. Indeed, much of the growing emphasis on service in schools has been paralleled by a growing emphasis on service to others as an integral part of congregational youth work. It has also become a major part of the programming

of denominations and national organizations engaged in religious youth work. Indeed, as early as 1991, Kenda Creasy Dean’s study of religious youth work in the United States described “the ‘other-directed’ ethos created by religious youth programs as another strength of today’s youth work. . . . Youth participation in religiously sponsored service projects has increased dramatically in the past decade.”

Whereas the federal government collects extensive data on school-based community service, much less is systematically gathered about service opportunities for young people in congregations. However, a variety of studies of congregational youth as well as adult leaders suggest that youth engagement in service through their congregations may be widespread, though certainly not universal:

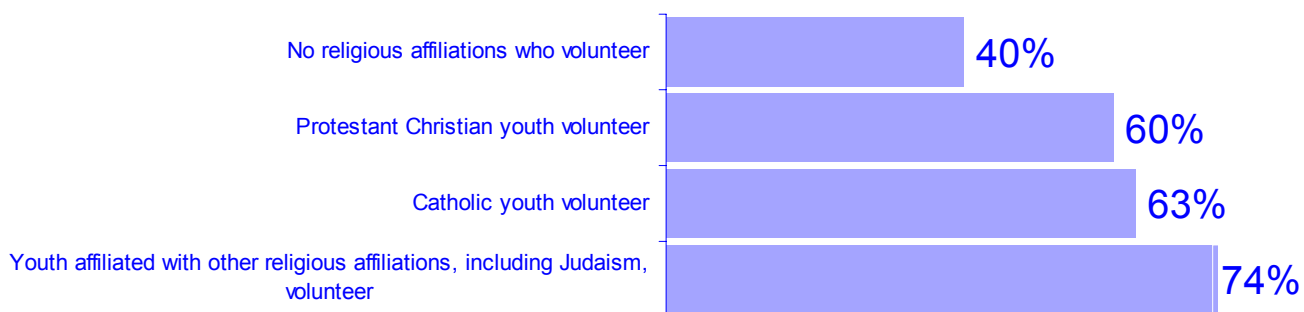
- Sixty-two percent of young people who participate in Catholic youth programs say they participate in community service projects in the parish “some-what” or “very much.”
- A study of American Jewish teenagers found that 46 percent do volunteer or community service work.
- A smaller study of Jewish youth in Minneapolis found that 56 percent reported spending at least one hour in a typical week doing volunteer work outside the Jewish community during the school year. Only 29 percent said

they spend that amount of time doing volunteer work within the Jewish community.

- Fifty-five percent of the young people surveyed by Search Institute in a study of five mainline Protestant denominations said their congregation emphasized reaching out to the poor and hungry, and 41 percent said their church emphasized involving members in helping other people.
- A Search Institute study of 500 religious youth workers found that 86 percent said their congregation offered youth community service projects at least once per year. Only 10 percent said their congregation offered projects at least once a month. In addition, 74 percent said their congregation offered mission projects.
- In contrast, surveys of religious educators in five mainline Protestant denominations indicated that only 47 percent of the congregations offered community service projects for youth in the current program year.
- A study of Lutheran churches found that, out of nine possibilities, service projects are the most common activity in Confirmation, with 62 percent of congregations including service projects in their programs.

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## Percent of Youth with Various Religious Affiliations who Volunteer





These snapshots suggest that service opportunities in and through congregations are widespread, but certainly not universal. And, as in other settings where young people serve, not all young people who affiliate with a congregation are involved in its service activities. Yet many of the observers with whom we spoke say they've seen a noticeable increase in the focus on youth service in congregations in the past 20 years. Consider these examples:

Within the Jewish movements, social action and service projects that respond to the commitment to *tikun olam* (repair of the world) and *gemilut chasadim* (acts of loving-kindness) have become an integral part of informal youth work as it has developed in the past two decades. "One of the most central places where young people will rally around," says Rabbi Dennis Eisner, formerly of Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, "is the idea of doing something for people who need our help." He notes that social action is one of the most popular tracks at the Union of American Hebrew Congregation's national youth leadership development academy at UAHC Camp Kutz, and at least half of the youth who attend participate in a social action elective. Furthermore, the national Jewish youth organizations with chapters affiliated with individual synagogues, temples, and shuls (National Federation of Temple Youth, United Synagogue Youth, and the National Conference of Synagogue Youth) often have youth-initiated social action projects as the primary group activities at the local, regional, and national levels.

While some religious traditions have always emphasized service and justice issues in youth work, the focus on service now crosses a wide range of theological and faith traditions. One observer of the trends in youth service in Christian churches is Thom Schultz, president of Group Publishing, which has sponsored summer workcamps for church youth groups since 1977 and included more than 12,000 young people in camps in the summer of 1999. "When we began, [service] was a natural activity for youth groups from mainline churches, because mainline churches have always had as a hallmark social justice," he recalls. "What has happened over the 20 years is that

mainline churches no longer have an exclusive clutch on it as they once did. Now everyone is just as interested in [youth] service."

## Opportunities to Serve Through Congregations

Young people get involved in serving others or doing volunteer work through their congregation in many different ways. These different opportunities within congregations suggest how pervasive service involvement or volunteering has become in religious youth work. They also raise important questions about how service is defined, what it includes, and how different types of service or volunteering have different kinds of impact.

*Within the congregation*—A considerable amount of congregation-based youth service centers on the congregation's programs and members. Indeed, 24 percent of all the youth volunteer work that is counted in Independent Sector's research is service within the congregation. This category includes teaching in religious education (6 percent), being a choir member (4 percent), and being an aide to a clergyperson (3 percent). Furthermore, 37 percent of the young people surveyed said they had done volunteer work at a church or synagogue in the past year, compared to 35 percent who said they had worked on a community service project.

*Service in the community*—Many youth get involved in service in their community through their congregation. Some volunteer on their own, based on recommendations from leaders in their congregation. Others participate through service projects or activities operated or coordinated by the congregation. Many of these service activities are tied to holidays, the ritual calendar, or the church year.

*National and international workcamps*—Workcamps, work trips, mission trips, and trips to Israel tend to be the most visible and enticing service experiences for youth in many congregations. Not only do young people have opportunities to serve, but they also like the chance to get away from home. Furthermore, the intensive, retreat-like closeness within the youth group over several days or a week can have a powerful bonding effect.

The opportunities for these experiences

abound. A Web search can locate literally hundreds of organizations sponsoring workcamps for youth (as well as adults). Some organizations are religious; others focus on specific causes. Without exception, the leaders we spoke with in national organizations and denominations that offer workcamp experiences have seen dramatic increases in participation across the past two decades. For example, Tom Bright, formerly of the Center for Ministry Development (which primarily reaches Catholic youth), says that the center's summer workcamps, Young Neighbors in Action, has grown by 30 to 40 percent each year since it was begun in 1994. In 1999, the program involved almost 2,000 youth in 27 different camps.

## Moving from Youth Service to Service-Learning

While it is clear that engaging young people in service is fairly widespread in congregations, there is much less evidence that such involvement is consistently rewarding, enriching, or effective. A decade ago, Search Institute wrote *Beyond Leaf Raking: Learning to Serve/Serving to Learn*, which was the first widely available resource that sought to infuse the principles and practices of service-learning into the congregational context. While this book has been widely distributed, there is no research available to determine whether service-learning principles are taking root deeply in the faith community.

Indeed, most observers say there is little evidence that congregations have moved beyond a traditional service project mentality. Writing from a Catholic perspective, Thomas Bright and John Roberto critique much of what they see in congregations: No component or program in youth ministry is more maligned or misused than service. Too often service projects serve in the unrewarding role of a parish requirement for the sacrament of Confirmation or a school requirement for graduation or course grade. Service becomes another "must" in the lives of youth. Many service projects are so poorly planned that they do more harm than good to youth and the people they are trying to help. . . . It is hard to believe this is what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of serving the needs of others.

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Thom Schultz of Group Publishing notes the missed opportunity when congregations “take their kids off and do a service project and perform some good work, and then simply go home.” The intentional opportunity to reflect on the service experience is essential for growth and learning, he affirms. “Serving and processing from a faith point of view have to go hand in hand.”

## Growing the Knowledge Base

While we are not aware of major studies focused specifically on service-learning with youth in the faith community, there are several initiatives underway that will shed additional light on these topics in coming years. They include:

*National Study of Youth and Religion*—Led by Christian Smith at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (with funding from the Lilly Endowment), this project is gathering basic information on youth participation in religion across all faith traditions. It will address information on types of service and justice involvement in congregations. For information: [www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org)

*Faith and Service*—With support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the National Crime Prevention Council and Baylor University are in the process of a major study (and formation of a technical assistance network) of the role of congregations of multiple faiths in addressing poverty as well as how community service impacts the faith of congregation members (including youth). For information: [www3.baylor.edu/CFCM](http://www3.baylor.edu/CFCM)

*Nurturing Children, Youth, and Families: A Survey for Congregations*—Search Institute is currently piloting a survey resource for congregations to use in assessing their strengths and priorities in nurturing children, youth, and families. We expect that this tool will help individual congregations assess their service-learning efforts, and aggregate data from multiple congregations in different faith traditions may yield additional insights for broader interpretation. For information: [www.search-institute.org/congregations/pilotinfo.html](http://www.search-institute.org/congregations/pilotinfo.html)

*Exemplary Youth Ministry*—Several Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical Christian institutions (under the leadership of Roland Martinson at Luther

Seminary with support from the Lilly Endowment) have undertaken a major study of effective youth ministry, focusing on congregations that have been nominated for making an impact in young people’s lives. The study will undoubtedly include findings related to service and service-learning. For information: [www.exemplarym.com](http://www.exemplarym.com)

## Strengthening Faith-Based Service Efforts

Given that young people are already involved in serving others through their churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other religious institutions, the potential for strengthening their efforts (and, as a result, youth engagement in service and social action) is profound. Important questions for the future include:

- How can the service-learning field begin a more intentional dialogue with those leading service efforts in the faith community so that religious leaders more fully understand what had been learned in school-based service-learning?
- How might the principles of effective service-learning be adapted, adopted, and tested within multiple faith traditions? How might the goals and strategies of service-learning be different in this different environment and set of priorities?
- How might bridges be built between local service-learning efforts in schools and those in congregations to create within a community a widespread norm and expectation of civic engagement, service, and activism for both youth and adults?

A service-learning approach has tremendous potential for congregations. Not only does it provide an effective strategy for helping young people live out a central tenet or belief of every major world religion, but it can cultivate new, committed leaders for congregations, the faith community at large, and, ultimately, this society.

## Request for Information

NYLC and Search Institute are currently collaborating to develop a new resource for congregations on service-learning. If you are involved in a faith-based initiative or congregational youth program that has adopted service-learning principles and practices, please tell us about what you’re doing. We would also like to know about any other research or evaluations on

service-learning in a religious context. Send information to [gener@search-institute.org](mailto:gener@search-institute.org).

**Web-Based Resources for Service-Learning in Faith Communities**

*National Study of Youth and Religion*  
[www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org)

*Faith and Service*  
[www3.baylor.edu/CFCM](http://www3.baylor.edu/CFCM)

*Nurturing Children, Youth, and Families: A Survey for Congregations by Search Institute*  
[www.search-institute.org/congregations/pilotinfo.html](http://www.search-institute.org/congregations/pilotinfo.html)

*Exemplary Youth Ministry*  
[www.exemplarym.com](http://www.exemplarym.com)

## References

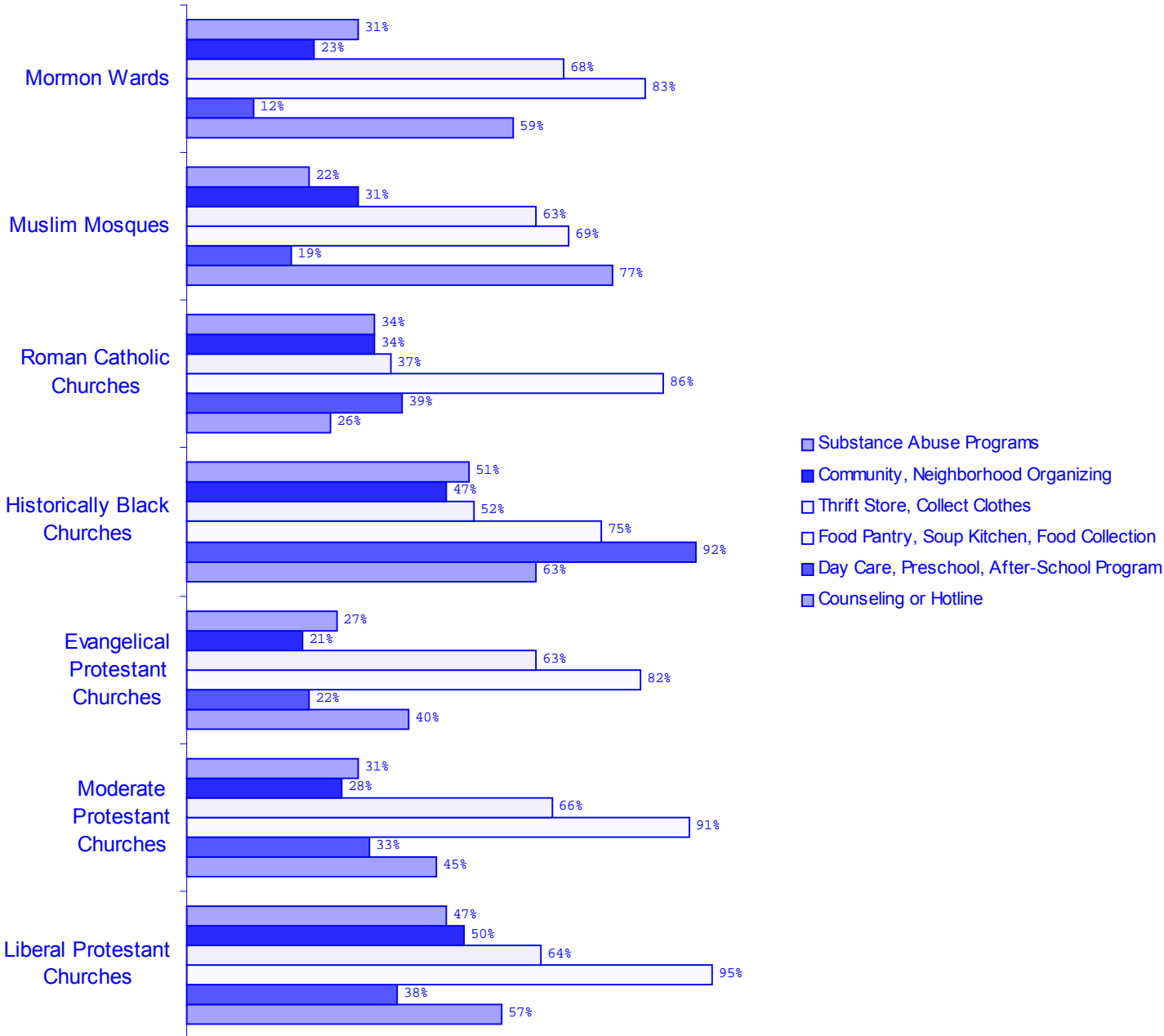
- <sup>1</sup> Virginia A. Hodgkinson and Murray S. Weitzman, *Volunteering and Giving among Teenagers 12 to 17 Years of Age: Findings from a National Survey, 1996 Edition* (Washington, DC: Independent Sector, 1997), 56.
- <sup>2</sup> Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 14.
- <sup>3</sup> Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 56.
- <sup>4</sup> From “Assets and Faith,” [www.search-institute.org/congregations/faith&assets.html](http://www.search-institute.org/congregations/faith&assets.html).
- <sup>5</sup> Christian Smith and Robert Faris, *Religion and Adolescent Delinquency, Risk Behaviors, and Constructive Social Activities* (Chapel Hill: National Study of Youth and Religion, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), p. 46.
- <sup>6</sup> Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 21.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, James Youniss, Jeffrey A. McLellan, and Miranda Yates, “Religion, Community Service, and Identity in American Youth,” *Journal of Adolescence*, 22 (1999), pp. 243–253.
- <sup>8</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, “A Synthesis of the Research on, and a Descriptive Overview of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish Religious Youth Programs in the United States,” a working paper prepared for the Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs, Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (February 1991).
- <sup>9</sup> Brian T. Froehle, *New Directions in Catholic Youth Ministry: A National Study of Catholic Youth Ministry Program Participants* (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry, 1996), 6.
- <sup>10</sup> Amy L. Sales, *Values and Concerns of American Jewish Youth: JCC Maccabi Teen Survey* (San Francisco: Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Institute for Community and Religion, Brandeis University, 1994), 9.
- <sup>11</sup> Nancy Leffert and Hayim Herring, *Shema: Listening to Jewish Youth* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1998), 24, 30.
- <sup>12</sup> Eugene C. Roehlkepartain and Peter L. Benson, *Youth in Protestant Churches* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1993), 63.
- <sup>13</sup> Eugene C. Roehlkepartain and Peter C. Scales, *Youth Development in Congregations: An Exploration of the Potential and Barriers* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1995), 46.
- <sup>14</sup> Roehlkepartain and Scales, 44.
- <sup>15</sup> Kathryn Christenson, “Reframing Confirmation,” *The Lutheran* (May 1999), 12–17.
- <sup>16</sup> Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 14, 30.
- <sup>17</sup> Peter L. Benson and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *Beyond Leaf Raking: Learning to Serve/Serving to Learn* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).
- <sup>18</sup> Thomas Bright and John Roberto, “Introduction to Action and Service Programming,” in Michael Moseley and John Roberto, *YouthWorks, Revised Edition* (Naugatuck, Conn.: Center for Ministry Development, 1996), section 11, Part 2, p. 3.

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## Congregations Sponsoring or Supporting Social Services in Selected Faith Traditions



SOURCE: Author’s synthesis of data from the *Faith Communities Today* study by Hartford Seminary of 14,301 congregations from 41 denominations and faith groups. (Data on Jewish congregations from the study was not available at the time of writing.) Retrieved from [www.fact.hartsem.edu](http://www.fact.hartsem.edu).

**Percent of Youth with Various Religious Affiliations  
Who Volunteer**

