

A Matter of Faith: Christian Participation in Social Movements

By Jeremy Castle¹

Throughout American history, the Christian church has been involved in a variety of social movements, from abolition to temperance to the pro-life movement. Using the Christian movement against poverty, this paper examines factors that contribute to Christian participation in SMOs. The primary dataset is a survey administered at the Christians Responding to Overcome Poverty (CROP) Walk in Madison, Indiana, on October 5, 2008. Later, selected participants were interviewed to add additional insight to the data from the surveys. Ultimately, this study finds that Christian participation in social movements is the result of both factors related to the church as a social network and factors related to the uniquely religious character of the church, including exposure to sermons on poverty, adherence to inspirational Biblical passages, and involvement in mission trips.

Introduction to Relevant Literature

Historically, Christians have been a driving ideological force behind social movements as diverse as temperance, abolition, and the Religious Right's protests against issues such as abortion and gay marriage (Wilcox 2007). For example, while reviewing volunteer applications for the 1964 Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's Summer Projects, sociologist Doug McAdam found that students often cited religious convictions as a factor in their decision to participate (1988, 48). Despite these high-profile cases of involvement, Brian D. McKenzie notes that attendance at Christian

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churches is either unrelated or negatively related to civic involvement (2001), leading some to wonder why Christians are considered such an important political force. One proposed explanation is that, “the political potency of white evangelical Protestants is found in their potential for mobilization, not in their actual mobilization” (Campbell 2004, 156). Part of this is due to the fact that many churches have access to a broad pool of resources, including facilities, leaders such as pastors and elders, and monetary resources. One extremely valuable resource that churches have access to is groups of people with presumably similar worldviews in the same geographic location (Wilcox 2007, 11). According to resource mobilization theory, access to these types of resources is the key to successful political mobilization for social movements (Zald and Ash 1966; Zald and Berger 1978; Cress and Snow 1998). Since churches have these resources on-hand, mobilization may be relatively quick and uncomplicated because the movement does not have to go through the time-consuming stage of locating resources, which often proves difficult for homeless advocates and other movements (Cress and Snow 1998). Since churches have access to a vast array of resources useful for political mobilization, the question becomes, what factors cause Christians to direct these resources towards a given social movement? This paper examines the contemporary Christian movement against poverty in order to understand what factors lead to the mobilization of Christians for political purposes.

Christian Involvement: the Case of CROP

To obtain data on Christian involvement in the movement against poverty, a survey was administered at the Christians Responding to Overcome Poverty (CROP) Walk in Madison, Indiana, on October 5, 2008. Every year, over 2,000 communities in

the United States host CROP walks, where walkers collect pledges for Church World Service, a nondenominational coalition of churches that provides poverty relief and disaster assistance to both local and worldwide communities (“Frequently Asked Questions about CROP Hunger Walks”). The Jefferson County CROP Walk channeled 25% of the money collected to three Jefferson County food pantries: St. Vincent de Paul Society of Madison, the Salvation Army of Madison, and Open Hands Open Hearts of Hanover (Clark). The remaining 75% of the money went to Church World Service, where it will be used to cover its expenses and to fund international poverty relief programs (Clark). Thus, the Jefferson County CROP Walk benefitted both local and global organizations, making it an interesting organization to study in the movement against poverty.

On the day of the walk, surveys were distributed to thirty-four of the estimated sixty walkers, asking questions about their religious and political backgrounds.² The surveys gave participants an opportunity to provide their contact information if they were willing to participate in follow-up interviews. From this information, five participants who reflected a variety of ages, denominations, and political beliefs were chosen to participate in the interviews. Each interview lasted roughly one hour, and explored various questions related to upbringing, personal religiosity, church involvement, and civic participation. The interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms throughout this paper to protect their identities.

The survey data reveals that walkers represented a variety of religious backgrounds and demographic categories. 82.2% of the walkers surveyed were

² Data for the exact number of participants is not available. This estimate was provided by the coordinator of the walk, Andy Clark.

Christians, 92.9% of whom said their religious faiths affected their decision to participate in the walk. More specifically, 67.6% agreed or strongly agreed that their religious faith affected their political views regarding poverty, and no respondent disagreed or strongly disagreed (see Table 1 below). A number of denominations were represented, including teams of walkers from Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. The majority (61.8%) of walkers came from Protestant backgrounds, and another 20.6% were Catholic (see Table 2 below). Age varied from middle-age couples with toddlers to senior citizens. Likewise, education levels ranged from those with some high school to those with graduate and professional degrees. Thus, the Jefferson County CROP Walk yielded a diverse sample of Christians who raised money to fight poverty, offering an in-depth look at the process of mobilization within Christian communities.

Table 1. Relationship of Religious and Political Views Regarding Poverty^a

Response	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't Say
Percent	11.8	55.9	23.5	0.0	0.0	5.9

^a Table is based on responses to the statement, “My religious beliefs affect my political views specifically in regards to poverty.”

Table 2. Religious Traditions of Survey Respondents^a

Religious Tradition	Catholic	Protestant	Buddhist	Other
Percent	20.6	61.8	2.9	14.7

^a Table is based on responses to the question, “In describing my religion, I consider myself...(listed responses were Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Atheist, Other.” Choices without responses were not included in Table 2.

The walkers also proved to be a politically diverse group. In terms of party identification, both major parties were well represented, but the Democratic Party seemed to have a slight advantage. There were a surprisingly large number of self-reported independents, especially considering the fact that this survey was administered roughly

one month before the 2008 general election (see Table 3 below). Similarly, walkers represented a variety of political ideologies, though there seemed to be a slight conservative skew (see Table 4 below). This information shows the bi-partisan nature of the walk: it was not simply a group of political conservatives or liberals. This, in turn, lends credibility to the argument that there was some non-political factor, such as religious belief, that motivated walkers to take part in the event.

Table 3. Self-Reported Party Affiliation of CROP Walk Participants^a

Party	Republican	Democratic	Independent	Other/Can't Say
Percent	26.5	32.4	29.4	11.8

^aTable based on responses to the question, “In describing my political party preference, I tend to think of myself as a: (responses as listed above).”

Table 4. Self-Reported Political Ideology of CROP Walk Participants^a

Ideology	Very Conservative	Mostly Conservative	Slightly Conservative	Neutral	Slightly Liberal	Mostly Liberal	Very Liberal
Percent	2.9	20.6	23.5	29.4	2.9	17.6	2.9

^aTable based on responses to the question, “In terms of my political preferences, on the following scale I find that I am: (responses as listed above).”

Walkers surveyed did not consider poverty the pre-eminent political issue in the nation, suggesting that a spirit of political activism regarding poverty was not the primary motivating factor for walkers. Political scientists believe that a small amount of the overall electorate is made up of “issue publics”: groups of voters who vote and participate in politics based on their interest in one particular issue (Popkin 1994, 28). To test whether walkers were members of an issue public, an open-ended question was built into the survey. The question read, “In my opinion, the most pressing political issue in the nation is _____.” Due to the fact that the survey was administered during the economic crisis of late 2008, the most popular response was the economy (see Table 5 below). Only one respondent wrote “poverty,” and that respondent actually wrote “the

economy” as well (in such cases, both responses were counted in creating the table).³

Thus, it seems poverty was not the preeminent political concern of the walkers, casting doubt on the theory that walkers were part of an issue public and again suggesting that some other factor influenced their decision to participate.

Table 5. Political Concerns of Respondents

Response	Frequency
The Economy	13
Foreign Affairs	3
Iraq War	3
National Debt	3
Abortion	2
Health Care	1
Supreme Court Nominees	1
Global Warming	1
Education	1
Poverty	1
Justice Issues	1

In addition to the sociological and political diversity of participants, the Jefferson Country CROP Walk proved to be a good case to study because the walk had not happened in the county for the previous twelve years, meaning that participants found out about the walk through means other than habitual participation. Only five of thirty-four respondents reported that they had previously participated in the Jefferson County CROP walk, meaning 85.3% of the walkers were first-time participants. This made it possible to study both the motivation and mobilization of walkers in this locally unknown event.

The coordinator of the walk was fifteen year-old youth group member Andy Clark, who became concerned about poverty while on a church-sponsored mission trip to El Salvador in 2007. As they helped the host church in El Salvador, church members

³ Not all walkers wrote in a response for this question, and several walkers wrote in two, thus accounting for the fact that Table 5 does not total up to 34 responses.

were exposed to the extreme poverty of the region. Clark recalled driving past a father and son standing together in front of their hut, both clearly on the verge of starvation. As a result of his experience, Clark became passionate about poverty relief. When his youth pastor told him about the CROP program, Clark decided that this was something, “God would want to be done,” and made a commitment to bring a CROP Walk to Jefferson County (Clark). Clark contacted Church World Service and set up the walk, and his church provided the resources to carry out the walk, ranging from tables and chairs for the registration booth to word-of-mouth advertising. The result was over \$2,300 raised for Church World Service.⁴ Clark and several other interviewees were surprised with the turnout and the amount of money raised, especially given that this was the first time the walk had happened in Jefferson County in twelve years, suggesting that they were able to successfully mobilize the people and resources needed to ensure the Jefferson County CROP Walk had an impact on poverty. The reasons for successful motivation and mobilization can be divided into three broad categories: the role of pastors, sermons, and scripture; community involvement as a result of church membership; and past experiences with social movements.

The Role of Pastors, Sermons, and Scripture

Scholarship notes the importance of leadership to the success of social movements. For instance, Cress and Snow show that strong leaders are a key factor in the viability of movements to aid the homeless (1998, 87). For Christian movements, we would expect that pastors and elders would provide much of the needed leadership.

Within the church community, the pastor holds a special role as a moral and spiritual

⁴ As of the time of writing, an exact figure was not available due to outstanding online donations. This figure represents the best estimate of the coordinator.

leader, giving him or her a unique influence within the community. Gregory Allen Smith hypothesizes that religious people look to priests for political information and guidance (2008, 37). In addition, Smith asserts that priests may influence parishioners by setting the political agenda, including emphasizing certain issues over others (2008, 38). The present study gives merit to Smith's work, as all five interviewees revealed a special bond of some sort with their pastor. For example, Jan Wright declared that her pastor was the type of person who she could go to for answers and advice, "under any circumstance." These relationships are important for this study because, as Clyde Wilcox notes, one reason that Christians become politically active is to, "make policies more consistent with the values of their faith" (2007, 3). It is possible that pastors function as agenda-setters who "prime" the congregation to care about and take political action regarding poverty by emphasizing it in sermons, thereby increasing its salience in the congregation's mind. The data shows that this very well may be the case. The surveys indicated that a resounding 96.4% of Christians in attendance reported that their pastor had spoken about poverty in the previous six-month period. For instance, Andy Clark's church had a guest speaker who addressed poverty and social justice, and Sarah Foster's pastor taught that workers were important regardless of occupation or wage. The fact that those interviewed have special relationships with their pastors, combined with the fact that pastors are speaking out about poverty, suggests that pastors and the messages about poverty that they were communicating were a factor in the decision to participate in the CROP walk.

The interviews also revealed that teachings on poverty were not limited to Sunday morning services. Jan Wright, the youth group coordinator at her church, led a series of

programs to teach the youth about poverty, including a “homelessness simulation” where youths slept in boxes in the church parking lot and a mission trip to Daytona Beach to work at a homeless shelter. Jessica Smith led a Bible study called Financial Peace University, designed to teach Biblical principles about wealth and poverty, at her church. Therefore, many of the participants have heard issues related to poverty addressed in religious settings other than church, and these messages likely influenced their decision to participate in the CROP Walk.

Along with teachings through pastors, another important source of motivation is scripture. David E. Campbell found that 73% of evangelicals and 35% of those belonging to mainline denominations believe that “The Bible is God’s word,” giving reason to suspect scripture influences the beliefs and actions of respondents (2004, 161). While interviewees concluded that a specific scripture passage was not the most important factor in their decision to participate, most were able to cite specific passages relating to the development of their beliefs on poverty. Four of the five interviewees cited a specific Biblical verse or story relating to poverty or social responsibility, including Matthew ch. 25, James 2:14, and Jesus feeding the five thousand hungry listeners. While explaining her passage choice, Jessica Smith said, “I feel like it’s a Biblical mandate that we should help the poor.” The fact that interviewees were able to cite these specific passages demonstrates that participants have been exposed to religious teachings regarding the importance of serving the poor.

Finally, the interviews show that walkers have integrated the need to help those in poverty into their worldview. When asked whether poverty was a moral issue, several of the interviewees argued that, as a wealthy country or as wealthy individuals, we have a

moral responsibility to support those less fortunate than us (Clark, Smith, Wright, Murphy). While none of the interviewees cited it, this argument closely resembles the teachings of Jesus in Luke 12:48, which reads, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded” (*NIV Study Bible*). This is evidence that the Christians in this study have a progressive theodicy, or theology of suffering, in which they have a responsibility to help the poor as part of their own religious and moral development (Roberts 2004, 234). More broadly, this suggests that the walkers have integrated the defense of those in poverty into their worldview, or the way they define meaning in their lives (Roberts 2004, 86). Thus, walkers seem to have a theology that requires them to take care of the poor, contributing to their decision to participate in the CROP walk. Overall, then, we may conclude that religious teachings seem to have had a major affect on the decision to participate.

Community Involvement

In addition to religious beliefs, several sociological variables affected participation in the CROP Walk. Among these sociological variables is community involvement. Doug McAdam found that volunteers who had participated in multiple clubs and organizations were more likely to follow through with their commitment to participate in Freedom Summer than those applicants who were not as active, showing the importance of community involvement to political participation (1988, 63). This seems to hold true for involvement in religious activities as well. Sociologists since Alexis de Tocqueville have acknowledged the importance of religious community in American civic life (2003, 512). Several social scientists have found that churchgoing Protestants who participate in church activities are more likely to volunteer in the

community than those who are not religious (Park and Smith 2000; Smidt et al. 2008). In addition, Verba et al. found that church activities such as soup kitchens, Bible studies, and writing newsletter articles teach important civic skills (1993). Djupe and Grant show that those developing civic skills within their congregations are more likely to participate in politics than church members who are not as active (2001). Thus, there is a wide body of scholarly literature attesting to the fact that religiosity leads to community involvement and, more specifically, political involvement. Therefore, we should expect to find a significant history of church involvement among the walkers.

Volunteers made it clear that the church was an important center of community in their lives. 82.4% of those surveyed reported attending religious services either weekly or more than weekly (See Table 6, pg.12). While survey reports of religious involvement are often subject to inaccuracies (see Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993; Marler and Hadaway 1999), this number still indicates that an unusually high percentage of those surveyed are regular churchgoers (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). Many of the interviewees had been involved in the church for the better part of their lives, and openly acknowledged the importance of the Christian community in their lives. Richard Murphy virtually grew up in the small church that bordered his family's property. For instance, he participated in hayrides, softball leagues, and dances organized through the church. Murphy also expressed concern that youth today were not as involved in the local church. Likewise, Sarah Foster remembered being a counselor at a Christian summer camp. Jan Wright is the leader of the youth group at her church, and chose to make the walk a youth group activity. Thus, for many of the interviewees, participation in the CROP Walk fit a lifetime pattern of involvement in church-sanctioned activities.

Table 6. Self-reported Religious Service Attendance of Survey Respondents^a

Frequency	More than Weekly	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Never
Percent	35.3	47.1	5.9	8.8	2.9

^aTable is based on responses to the statement, “I attend religious services...(More than Weekly, Weekly, Monthly, Rarely, Never).”

Within their church communities, volunteers participated in a variety of religious activities throughout the week. 35.3% of Christian survey respondents indicated that they attend church more than once a week, and interviews revealed a wide variety of religious activities in addition to attending Sunday worship service. Jessica Smith attends a weekly Bible study and works as a church secretary, and Jan Wright is a youth group leader. Richard Murphy is part of his church’s Sister Church Committee, which manages a formal relationship with a church in Guatemala that includes financial support, written encouragement, and biannual missions trips. Sarah Foster takes part in a weekly Bible study and is a member of the Evangelism Committee at her church. Thus, the CROP Walk participants fit Djupe and Grant’s finding that Christians who are involved are more likely to participate in politics than less active members (2001).

The interviewees exhibited a pattern of involvement in the larger community as well. Sarah Foster found out about the CROP walk from a friend at city hall, and she chose to attend in part because she knew Andy Clark’s mother from participating in a series of family programs (“play dates”) Mrs. Clark had coordinated around the local community. Sarah Foster also formed a team to participate in the walk from the participants in a yoga class she teaches. Jan Wright indicated that, in addition to her religious beliefs, the needy families she encounters as a social worker led to her decision to participate in the CROP walk. Together, volunteers’ activities show a pattern of

involvement within both the church and the community as a whole, confirming the hypothesis that the sociological aspects of participation also affected mobilization for the walk.

An important side-effect of church involvement is the development of a social network. Djupe and Grant found that recruitment to politics by a fellow believer was a significant factor in political involvement of Christians (2001, 305). In the present study, Jan Wright and Richard Murphy found out about the walk from Andy Clark's mother, and all of the interviewees were acquainted with her. When asked to name members of their social network who also attended the walk, by far the most frequent responses were members of their church and the coordinator's family. Similarly, when asked who pledged money for their walk, interviewees overwhelmingly cited members of their family and church community. These findings confirm the importance of the church as a means of social networking for the participants in the Jefferson County CROP walk.

Past Experience in Social Movements

In addition to community involvement, scholarship suggests that involvement in past social movements makes individuals more likely to participate in future social movements (McAdam 1988, 63, 161). In the survey, 57.1% of Christian respondents reported that they had been involved in another poverty relief program in the one-year period prior to the CROP walk. However, the interviews suggested a more mixed pattern of involvement. Of the five interviewees, Richard Murphy remembered running food drives and helping out at a women's shelter while in college, but otherwise none remembered being involved in past social movements. Several of the volunteers who had not participated in social movements cited that they grew up in rural areas where it was

hard to get involved. Sarah Foster recalled hearing about civil rights and women's rights from friends and television programs but did not get involved because an organization was not present in the area where she lived. Jessica Smith said that she was born late enough that she missed the peak of social movements in the 1960's, and had she been alive then, she does not believe that she would have participated due to her conservative political beliefs. Therefore, it seems that there is mixed evidence on whether involvement in prior social movements was a factor in CROP participation.

However, if we expand the definition of social movements to include service-oriented mission trips, the relative activity of the volunteers becomes clear. Mission trips have many of the same effects on participation as past experience in social movements. For instance, participants in mission trips experience poverty first hand, leading to identification and emotional connections with those in poverty. Andy Clark decided to organize the CROP Walk as a result of his experience in El Salvador, and Richard Murphy has made a total of three service trips to El Salvador. Clark made it clear that seeing the economic conditions in El Salvador was a major factor in his decision to organize the walk. Similarly, the "homelessness simulation" Jan Wright organized at her church was specifically designed to help the youth group members understand the hardships that the homeless endure. In these cases, mission trips and other church activities play a similar role as past experience in social movements when it comes to future participation. This shows how the unique elements of the Christian faith provide sociological experiences that contribute to participation in social movements, such as the movement against poverty.

Conclusion

The data from the interviews and surveys indicate that both religious beliefs and sociological factors account for Christian participation in social movements. The communication of church doctrine regarding poverty through both sermons and scripture provides ideological support for the fight against poverty. Church community allows for the development of both civic skills and a network of people with presumably similar religious beliefs, who are able to relate with and encourage one another to participate in political activities. Churches also provide opportunities for Christians to become involved in mission trips, where they often have the opportunity to see poverty first-hand, forming an emotional connection with those in poverty. Such trips reinforce religious convictions regarding poverty with strong personal experiences, further strengthening the desire to participate in social movements that benefit those in poverty. Thus, this study finds that a number of factors related to the religious experience of walkers contributed to participation in the Jefferson County CROP Walk (see Table 7).

Table 7. Factors in Participation, by Interviewee

	Trust and Respect Pastor	Cited Bible Passage on Poverty	Argued for a Biblical Mandate to Help	Active in 1 or More Church Programs	Active in 1 or More Community Programs	Knew Clark Family	Mission Trip or Other Poverty Relief
Clark	✓	✓	✓	✓		n/a	✓
Smith	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Murphy	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Wright	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foster	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	

There is a great need for future scholarship on Christian participation in social movements. The above study was performed by one researcher with no funding and limited resources. Therefore, more extensive studies of similar movements in different

size towns and different areas of the country could reveal differences in the way resources are mobilized. Similarly, the participants in this study came from primarily small and medium-size churches, so it is possible that those who attend “megachurches” display different patterns of participation than those observed here. Another area for future exploration is how Christians use the government, especially at the state and national levels, to create change. For instance, it is possible that congregations play a more important role than individuals in organizing and mobilizing resources when the government is the primary audience of the movement. Finally, scholarship may build upon the similarities between the benefits of experience in past social movements and mission trips to future participation in social movements. From the present study, it is clear that Christians have a large potential for mobilization, especially on issues with moral framing, due to both the religious teachings and sociological benefits of church membership. For this reason, it is my prediction that Christians will continue to be an important source of social movements in the United States.

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