



**Ideas in Indiana:  
A Report from SIPR's Breakfast Briefing on  
The Expanding Role of Community- and Faith-Based Groups in America  
Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Introduction**

Jay Hein, President  
Sagamore Institute for Policy Research

The Ideas in Indiana series goes to the heart of our mission and our methodology at Sagamore Institute for Policy Research (SIPR). First, we're a think tank, so we do believe that ideas have consequences. But we also believe that ideas without action are incomplete. Innovation and positive change only occur when we join the best ideas with leaders who can put them into practice, which is where the Indiana part comes in. Connecting the right ideas to the right leaders at the right time is no easy task. As such, SIPR adopts a methodological pluralism to our activities, which is a complicated way of saying that we strive to operate in several areas of policy: We need to perform higher-order scholarship in order to do rigorous research and influence public opinion. At other times, we need to offer very concrete policy insights in order to shape government reform and be relevant and applicable to policymakers' day-to-day experience. And lastly, perhaps most importantly, we need to be very pragmatic in offering concrete solutions to those practitioners who are executing reform at the street level. Nowhere is this methodology on display better than the Ideas in Indiana forums, which wouldn't be possible without the support of our friends at Lilly Endowment.

Our friend and colleague Barbara Elliott has added to the ledger in all three of those areas—scholarship, policy insight, and real solutions for practitioners and policymakers—with her new book *Street Saints*. The product of eight years of hands-on experience with grassroots practitioners and more than 300 interviews, Barbara's acclaimed book details how people of faith are working in neighborhoods, communities, and cities throughout the United States to change lives. Barbara reminds us that these unsung heroes range from grade school dropouts to PhDs, from former prostitutes to business executives, from ex-gang members to preachers. They are every color and every denomination. What unites them is a commitment to helping others turn their lives around.

*Street Saints* profiles these motivated people, the programs they are running, the lives they are changing, and the communities they are renewing. It chronicles their practices, their track records and their successes. I should add that among the dozens of organizations and hundreds of heroes Barbara has profiled in *Street Saints*, we find a trio of Indiana-based organizations—the Wheeler Mission, Craine House and Oaks Academy.

By way of introduction, Barbara Elliott is an Associate Fellow with Sagamore Institute for Policy Research. She is the founder of the Center for Renewal in Houston, which serves faith-based organizations, particularly those working in the inner city. President George W. Bush gave her the Eleanor

Roosevelt Award for Human Rights in 2001, honoring her work with refugees and the poor. She has served President Reagan in the White House, the Heritage Foundation on Capitol Hill, and the Hudson Institute as a Senior Fellow. A former international correspondent for PBS, she previously authored *Candles Behind the Wall: Heroes of the Peaceful Revolution that Shattered Communism*, and scores of articles on civic renewal. She is also a philanthropic advisor with the Legacy Group. It was a pleasure and honor to feature her at SIPR's inaugural Ideas in Indiana gathering.

**What is a Street Saint?**

Barbara Elliott  
Director, Center for Renewal  
Associate Fellow with SIPR

*Editor's Note: This essay is excerpted from the introduction to Elliott's book Street Saints.*

Street saints are people on the front lines of our communities, who are serving the broken, the forgotten, the abandoned, and the abused. They live where we live—in cities and communities we have driven past for years, places that are both beautiful and tough, heartbreaking and inspiring. They are binding the wounds of battered women and children, feeding the hungry, and leading addicts out of captivity. Street saints are walking into drug infested neighborhoods to broker truces between gang members. They are scooping up heroin and crack addicts from our cities' streets and loving them back into wholeness. They are helping families transition from welfare into work and productivity. They are walking into schools all across the nation to put an arm around an at-risk child and become a mentor.

Street saints who were victims of crime are walking into our prisons to confront prisoners face to face, so they will not commit crimes again. They are giving new immigrants entrepreneurial skills and language training to make them capable of supporting themselves. A street saint is someone who is willing to go where there is pain and suffering, and be a presence of healing with love. They are people driven by faith where the rubber hits the road. And they are renewing America's soul.

Street saints are very different kinds of people: Gib Vestal is an investment banker turned construction boss for an athletic facility for inner city kids. Kathy Foster is a former nun who cares for abandoned and abused children. Bob Muzikowski is an insurance executive who loves baseball and founded a league and school for the kids in the inner city neighborhood he moved into. Brian King was a gang member who used to do drive-by shootings, who now counsels parents whose children have been killed. Freddie Garcia is a reformed heroin addict who now helps others to leave drugs. Wilson Goode is a

former mayor whose father was imprisoned, who founded a group to mentor children of prisoners. Sylvia Bolling is a speech pathologist turned neighborhood renewer. Reid Carpenter is a former Young Life leader who now leads a movement embracing entire cities.

Street saints are doctors who have become urban missionaries, jazz musicians and nurses, teachers and preachers, stockbrokers and manufacturers. They may be Anglo, Latino, African-American, Asian, Presbyterian, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Mennonite, Baptist, Nazarene, Charismatic, Pentecostal, or nondenominational. (There are many people of other faiths in America who are doing compassionate work in caring for the needy. Their work is valid and valuable, but the main focus of my book is Christ-centered work.) Street saints are reconcilers among the races and bridges over denominational chasms, offering unity where there is division in an increasingly balkanized country.

There is no single educational background to equip them. Ivy leaguers with PhDs find themselves working side by side with street-savvy high school dropouts, former addicts and drug dealers who have an education from the streets no doctoral program could ever offer. Together, they have discovered that to transform a human life, you have to get to root causes rather than treating symptoms. It's hard work, and it takes a lot of time and intense effort.

#### *A Resilient Spirit*

Americans sprang into action when the hijacked planes smashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. The flames seared our souls as people leapt from windows to a ghastly death, and firefighters heroically charged up the stairwells laden with 60 pounds of equipment to rescue others at the expense of their own lives. We cheered for their heroism with a lump in our throats and a deep admiration we had almost forgotten we could have in this jaded age.

Something was still smoldering, deep in the American soul, which was re-ignited by the fiery explosions of September 11. Embers of resilience and greatness were lit again, blazing forth in heroism to sacrifice one's life for others, and to serve the suffering. Unity that had been fractured by so many "isms" and numbed by complacency was galvanized. Ashes covered our faces, and we were no longer black or white or brown, but one shade of gray. In that moment, there were no more hyphenated Americans. We prayed together in grief, one people, crying out to God in a wail of incomprehension. Our political representatives stood shoulder to shoulder before the capitol, joined hands over their party divisions, and sang "God bless America" with one voice. Suddenly, we were one nation again.

An outpouring of compassion and generosity swept in a vast wave from across the nation to embrace the victims. Churches swelled to overflowing, and for a moment we stopped, and paused to reevaluate. People prayed, and married, and conceived children, and we did things we had put off, because time seemed suddenly precious. *Everything changed*, we said. And for a time it did. But only for a time. Within a few short months the seared mind of the nation was no longer so conscious of the gaping wound, except in New York as people walked by Ground Zero. And as the war against terrorism has dribbled on with its daily carnage, most of us have sunk again into our old ways.

But what that experience made clear is that the American soul may have atrophied, but it is not dead. The American soul that since our founding has cared for our neighbor with

generosity, respect, and compassion has not been extinguished by modernity. Americans have been generous, historically, and we have been a country with an extraordinary degree of compassion and good will. Anyone who has lived elsewhere in the world is struck by it when they come to these shores. And even as tattered as the social fabric of America has become in recent years, this remains true. But today the pain in our own country has not tugged at the heartstrings of the nation the way the victims of 9/11 did, because we do not hear the cries of those who perish in flames, or suffocate in the smoke. We do not see and we do not hear the people in our own communities who suffer quietly. And yet these victims of violence and neglect, both physical and emotional, are around us in every city and town. And it's not a question of which neighborhood. They are all around us, among us.

No amount of wealth or new edict of political policy can take the place of a vibrant soul of a nation. And that is very much in peril now. The problem is that so many of the victims around us are invisible. The 2.5 million children who have a parent incarcerated aren't even a blip on the screen for most of us. We don't know their names, or where they go to school. Sometimes even their own teachers don't know of their plight, because the children are ashamed to admit that they have a parent behind bars. Yet these forgotten children are seven times more likely than their classmates to follow their parents into jail because of the kind of life they are thrust into, through no fault of their own.

The same invisibility blankets the working poor, the single mother who has left welfare only to discover that it's not possible to feed her children and pay for an apartment with one minimum wage job, and that she has to work two, while patching together care for her offspring. The mentally ill who wander the streets in the ranks of the homeless are virtually unemployable, and largely invisible. Nobody wants to adopt HIV babies, and yet they are among us. The health needs of the uninsured fester quietly. This is the soft underbelly of an otherwise affluent nation. We seldom personally lift a hand to help the weak.

The modern mindset points us toward the government to provide the solutions. But as Ambassador Dan Coats has pointed out, there are some things the government cannot do. The most important question is not what should the government do, but what should we as individuals do? It's far easier to debate the first question. But where the rubber hits the road is where we put our own convictions into action in our own community, with our own time and money...

The maladies of our country do not come from our material circumstances. They come from a poverty of spirit. Too few hands move swiftly enough to give where there is need. But those hands that do move, perform amazing acts. So what's the result? What's the scope of faith-based work in America? Sociologist Ram Cnaan has devoted the past ten years to finding out what religious congregations in America provide. The Israeli-born social scientist, a secular Jew, admits candidly, "I didn't get into this field because of my religious beliefs. I moved into studying religion and social work... almost by mistake. My academic interest was in how society provides social services." (See Ram Cnaan, "The Role of Religious Congregations in Providing Social Services," presented to The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy at the Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany, pp. 1-2.)

He was flummoxed to discover that America doesn't provide these services through the government, as is usually the case in the European countries he had written about

extensively. In the European model, the government taxes, gives the money to local authorities, regulates them, and they provide services.

When he came to the United States, he asked people, "Who provides social services?" No one knew what to answer. So he said, "Six o'clock in the evening, you've been evicted from your home, you can't eat, where would you go?" People would pause and say, "Well, to a homeless shelter, or I'd go to a soup kitchen." He assumed these were government agencies. When one of his students mentioned a "Baptist homeless shelter," he didn't see how those words could fit together. The entrepreneurial bent of faith-based ministry Cnaan discovered in America fascinated him.

Cnaan has documented that there are approximately 350,000 different congregations in the United States. (See Ram A. Cnaan, *The Invisible Caring Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2002) p. 9.) These congregations include all religions in America: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and others. He estimates the annual value of the work each congregation provides in helping others is \$184,000. He found that 93% of religious congregations provided at least one program of service for the community. (See Ram Cnaan, *The Invisible Caring Hand*, p. 62.) And the beneficiaries were most often poor neighborhood children who had no affiliation with the church.

Religious congregations spend \$36 billion providing services in America today. Many such programs address the needs of children, the elderly, the poor, and homeless, while others are involved in housing projects or neighborhood renewal, pastoral care, aid for the ill, or counseling. Some offer financial assistance, health care, or educational programs. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research concluded after a study of more than 14,000 congregations that "nearly 85% of US congregations are engaged in soup kitchens or food pantries, emergency shelters and clothing pantries, and with financial help to those in need." (See <http://fact.hartsem.edu>.) Beyond these services offered by churches, there are a plethora of stand-alone nonprofits that churches have spun off, or which were founded as fully separate entities altogether. Sometimes called para-church organizations, these faith-based institutions are also providing significant services.

#### *Faith in Action*

Are faith-based organizations making a difference? A growing body of research indicates that some faith-based programs are making headway in treating social maladies that have resisted all other attempted cures. Faith-based prison programs are reducing the rate of recidivism of released convicts, which runs at 50% or more, cutting it in half or even lower. Mentoring programs for at-risk youth are delivering documented improvement in academic performance and fewer disciplinary infractions. Faith-based drug and alcohol treatment programs are releasing addicts from their life-crippling habit, some with a success rate as high as 83%. Much more remains to be done to validate the results of such programs, as not a great deal of serious sociological research has been published that focuses exclusively on documenting the "faith factor."

There are lots of wonderful stories, but as the sociologist John DiIulio likes to remind us, the plural of anecdote is not data. Yet as the sociological evidence continues to come in, even skeptics are concluding that faith is a force to be reckoned with. Indeed, Street Saints are changing our country, one neighborhood at a time.

#### **Snapshots of Street Saints**

*Barbara Elliott*

*Director, Center for Renewal*

*Associate Fellow with SIPR*

Victory Fellowship of Texas

San Antonio, Texas

<http://www.victoryfellowship.com>

- Ends drug addiction through intentional spiritual transformation
- Immerses recovering addicts in a structured program to change their character as well as their behavior
- Knits together Church and home for recovering addicts to address the needs of their families as well
- Has helped more than 13,000 participants end lives of addiction and substance abuse
- Has spawned 70 affiliates in the United States and five other countries
- A 1999 study by Northwestern University revealed that of those who have completed the program: 86% remain drug free, 90% were employed two years later (compared to only 41% in similar programs), and 84% were found to attend church weekly

Family House

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

[www.always.org.uk/familyhouse](http://www.always.org.uk/familyhouse)

- Buys and acquires dilapidated properties to create a critical mass in the neighborhood for revitalization and renewal
- Provides care for the elderly using a financial model that absorbs costs of those who cannot pay fully
- Uses opportunities to teach local residents health basics and nutrition
- Serves 58 elderly, indigent residents with 24-hour long-term care
- Provides medical care through some 2,000 annual clinic visits
- Feeds 3,000 to 4,000 neighbors annually through a food pantry
- 50 neighborhood children served in after-school program
- Has decreased crime in the neighborhood

Kids Hope USA

Multiple States

[www.kidshopeusa.org](http://www.kidshopeusa.org)

- Provides a one-on-one relational approach: one mentor for each child, meeting weekly for at least one year.
- One professional staff person administers each team of mentors, assisted by a support team provided by each church.
- Directors are trained by national Kids Hope USA staff; mentors are screened, trained, and supervised. All are held accountable to written standards.
- Partnerships link one school and one church.
- 94% of all programs since 1995 are still operational.
- Effectively mobilizes and retains volunteer talent, while using one part-time administrator in each church to guarantee professional standards.
- Provides a vehicle for church engagement in the community, while bringing the energy and relationships back into the church.
- Has been successfully replicated in 217 partnerships in 26 states, now providing 3,800 children with a mentor
- Documented improvement in children's behavior, academic skills, and motivation for school work

The Oaks Academy  
Indianapolis, Indiana

[www.theoaksacademy.org](http://www.theoaksacademy.org)

- Provides a challenging classical learning curriculum for students pre-school-aged to eighth grade
- Guarantees a class size no larger than 15 to promote learning
- Chartered to include low-income students
- Requires parental involvement
- Offers “wraparound services” for families in Jubilee Center, including health care, legal services, job training, after-school programs
- Students performing one-two years above grade level; seventh graders performing three-four years above grade level

InnerChange Freedom Initiative  
Texas, Minnesota, Kansas and Minnesota

[www.ifiprison.org](http://www.ifiprison.org)

- Provides 24/7 immersion in a faith-saturated Christian program for volunteer prisoners
- Aims for spiritual transformation in participants
- Long-term intervention: Inmates enter 16 to 24 months before their release, continue 6 to 12 months after release
- Provides job skills, life skills, continued education, Bible study, reconciliation with victims, anger management, substance abuse counseling
- Offers one-on-one mentoring while in prison and after release
- Provides post-release assistance: help finding housing, employment, connection to local congregations
- Boasts a much lower recidivism rate than other program: just 17.3% rearrested in 2 years, compared to 35% in matched group; 8% returned to prison, compared to 20.3% in match comparison group

Bridges to Life  
Houston, Texas

[www.bridgestolife.org](http://www.bridgestolife.org)

- Pairs victims of crime with perpetrators of crime face-to-face
- 12-week encounters in small groups work deeply, relationally
- Requires inmates participants to write letters to victims and their own families asking forgiveness
- Provides a curriculum covering responsibility, repentance, reconciliation and restitution
- Boasts a 10% recidivism rate among graduates, compared to the 50% national average
- Has more than 1,000 graduates

Craine House  
Indianapolis, Indiana

[Craine House Link](#)

- Provides an innovative alternative sentencing option for mothers of small children
- Lessens traumatic separation of infants and toddlers, decreasing damage to them
- Challenges mothers with keen oversight, drug testing and one-strike policy on infractions
- Provides discipline, encouragement and character formation through classes and mentoring

- Decreases recidivism to just 20.8%, compared to national average of nearly 50%

Wheeler Mission  
Indianapolis, Indiana

[www.wmm.org](http://www.wmm.org)

- Provides not only shelter but transitional living
- Offers “Life With a Purpose” program, a Biblically based curriculum to guide people away from addiction
- Runs a learning center offering individualized instruction for GED and other courses
- Provides life skills training, including budgeting prepares for transition into self-sufficiency
- Reunites families in outdoors environment
- 50% of men who enter “Life With a Purpose” program leave addiction

One by One Leadership  
Fresno, California

[www.onebyoneleadership.com](http://www.onebyoneleadership.com)

- Trains “equipping teams” from 62 churches, with 4,100 individuals now actively engaged in outreach throughout Fresno
- Has placed 400 welfare-to-work participants in jobs
- Has trained 15 job coaches and 120 church-base job mentors
- Provides “cross-pollinating” for 75 civic, government and faith leaders every month
- Revitalized an entire city block through “City Builders Campus,” helped transform Fresno from a city of despair into an “All American City” in 2000

National Jobs Partnership

[www.tjp.org](http://www.tjp.org)

- Offers skills in communication, conflict resolution, integrity and stewardship
- Provides mentors from churches to “walk” with mentees for two years
- Offers backup transportation, assistance with child care, housing
- Opens the doors of business by providing training and accountability for future employees
- Has placed 1,800 graduates in jobs
- 84% of graduates are still employed one year later
- Replicated in 27 cities

*For more information on these organizations and other places where street saints do their important work, we invite you to read Barbara Elliott's book *Street Saints: Renewing America's Cities*. To order a copy, just visit [www.streetsaints.com](http://www.streetsaints.com).*