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The Role of U.S. Denominations in Mobilizing International Voluntary Service (IVS)

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Abstract

American religionists provide significant material, financial and personnel “flows” globally, largely through an unregulated private market of charitable activities. There is wide variation in this activity, with some advancing overt religious or evangelical aims and others pursuing patently progressive missions like the education and empowerment of women and girls. This study investigated the scope and extent of international service activity conducted under the auspices of mostly mainline Protestant denominations. The findings offer perspective on the international ambitions of mainstream Christianity in the U.S., which supports fewer career missionaries today while volunteer ranks assume the church’s role in outreach globally.

Introduction

Whether compelled by natural disasters, political upheaval, or the suffering caused by poverty, religious organizations are responsible for the mobilization of members, adherents or affiliates across many international boundaries. Some groups carry their religious intent overtly into the humanitarian service field, hoping to turn the occasion of responding to human need into an opportunity for evangelization. Others give comparatively little emphasis to their religious or faith orientation and choose instead to focus on the act of service itself as the motivation for international intervention (Thaut; Kniss and Campbell).

Religiously linked organizations that send staff and volunteers abroad originate in many different countries, reflecting extensive global networks of human, financial, and material resource flows (Ebaugh and Chafetz). In the U.S., religious groups contribute a large share of the nation’s nonprofit international humanitarian assistance. About 33 percent of all private

voluntary organizations officially recognized by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have a religious connection, up from about 19 percent in 1939 (McCleary and Barro).

Despite advances in general understanding of religious or faith-based humanitarian efforts, our knowledge about international volunteering through such groups is incomplete. Empirical research about religiously motivated international service remains an understudied aspect of the growing body of knowledge about international voluntary service or IVS (Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, and McBride). For instance, we do not know the scale of such efforts, whether this activity is increasing or in decline, the types of activities, or how they differ by denominational group. Nor do we know to what extent the activities of religiously motivated international volunteers are governed by institutional priorities or primarily by the choices of individual volunteers themselves.

Although data are not readily available about the extent of U.S. religious volunteering abroad, there is indication this is an important, and likely growing, activity (Lough). The National Congregations Study (NCS), drawn from a representative sample of U.S. places of worship, found in 2006 that nearly half (41.6%) of religious congregations held gatherings to consider “travel to another country to provide assistance to people in need” (Chaves and Anderson). Religious congregations comprise almost one-fourth of the estimated 1.3 million tax-exempt organizations in the U.S. Third Sector, making the paucity of research about their international volunteer activities a serious omission (Anheier). Furthermore, as scholarship has examined the role of religion and religious identity in international affairs (for example, see Casanova; Fox 2008; Hanson; McDuire-Ra and Rees), the actions and motivations of American religious group intervention abroad have assumed increased importance. In addition, such interventions may have implications for the social and political development of the host countries where volunteers undertake such service.

The present study aims to address certain limitations in our knowledge about the international volunteering of religious adherents by examining the types, scope, and extent of this activity by individuals associated with major Christian denominations in the U.S. In addition, the study explores the role played by these denominations in mobilizing volunteer activity abroad. Through information gathered from organizational websites as well as phone surveys and in-depth interviews with denominational representatives, the study uses a deductive approach to establish a conceptual foundation for further research on international voluntary service by institutionalized U.S. religious groups.

Guiding Concepts from the Literature

From available accounts, international volunteering of all sorts has steadily increased over the last several decades, with individuals from nations around the world undertaking journeys of good will and service. Several developments have contributed to these trends (Anheier and Themudo). To be sure, advances in information technology have improved communication across disparate parts of the world. With Internet and cellular technology, it is possible for prospective volunteers and the organizations that sponsor them to have instantaneous contact with host organizations in even remote regions. In addition, the end of the Cold War opened up new possibilities for international travel to territories previously held under authoritarian rule or formerly aligned with the Soviet Union. Such accessibility

and the relative ease of travel abroad have contributed to the ranks of international volunteers.

As applied generally, the concept of international voluntary service is defined as largely unpaid individual or group activity “sponsored by public or private organizations” that takes place in a national context outside of a participant’s own country (Sherraden, Lough, and McBride). Sherraden et al. (2006) posit that international service occurs most often in one of two main categories of endeavor: international understanding, or development aid and humanitarian relief.¹ The length of time volunteers spend abroad varies significantly, from stints as short as a week to six months or more. In addition, research about international service has considered its “civic” character (its value and contribution to society) and how much international “exposure” volunteers experience, particularly whether participants engage in exchanges or stays in multiple countries (Sherraden; Sherraden et al. 2006).

Research to date on international volunteers generally (not just those religiously motivated) provides a descriptive picture of their common attributes. A recent study of international volunteers from the U.S. determined that young adults aged 15-24 years were those most likely to engage in unpaid service abroad (Lough). Adults approaching traditional retirement age (55-64 years) represented the next largest age cohort of international volunteers, suggesting that those with both leisure time and slack resources were also able to embark on service opportunities abroad. Volunteers identified in Lough’s 2010 study were most likely to be employed (66 percent) and living in higher earning households (\$100,000 or more). Importantly for the present study, Lough found nearly half (48%) of those volunteering abroad were “associated with a religious organization” (3), a higher rate of affiliation than volunteers in domestic settings (estimated at around 35%).

Far less has been published about religious organizations that send volunteers abroad. These organizations take many forms, and their reasons for volunteer mobilization vary widely (Thaut). The category of “religious organizations” is broad, ranging from formal religious authorities to groups considered religious in name or mission only and some having no official ties or accountability to a specific religious authority. For example, organizations with a global reach such as Habitat for Humanity International have no formal affiliation with any religious body but are faith-based in orientation and responsible for mobilizing the volunteer activity of thousands each year in areas across the developing world (for a description of such differences, see Smith and Sosin). However, the present study focuses on volunteer activity undertaken through a specific type of religious organization, namely, formal and established religious entities: Christian denominations with a national presence in the U.S. Protestant Christian denominations represent a large share of religious adherents in the U.S., about 51 percent according to the most recent Pew Landscape of American Religion survey. Although Protestant churches tend to emphasize the congregation as the primary locus of activity, many are linked together in national associational bodies (denominations) that offer notable resource advantages.

¹ Sherraden and colleagues reference Smith, Ellis, and Brewis in support of these two dimensions of international voluntary service (international understanding; development aid and humanitarian relief). The reference is in error, however, as the latter source does not mention these two categories.

The volunteer mobilization activities of these formal religious bodies, in particular, have not been empirically examined. Scant research provides few specific details about the scope or scale of the international volunteering by adherents of these groups. Furthermore, many of the Christian denominations based in the U.S. maintain ties to related or “sister” institutions in other parts of the world. These ties may facilitate the mobilization of volunteers internationally through established networks of more formal interaction. Many religious bodies are linked globally by common doctrinal or organizational affiliation, similar to the structure that connects the Roman Catholic Church albeit on a smaller scale and with less centralized authority. In this way, Christian denominations in the U.S. are part of a larger phenomenon described in recent research as networks forming so-called transnational religion (Rudolph). The potential movement of volunteers along these network pathways could represent the flow of significant resources, primarily in the form of personnel but also in ways both financial and material (Ebaugh and Chafetz).

The literature on transnational religious networks has explored the political and social implications of the movement of religious ideology across national boundaries and provides a broad theoretical context for the study. The phenomenon of transnational religion is just one aspect of what social scientists have described as a global resurgence of religion in international affairs in the past few decades (Hanson; Huntington; Thomas 2005). One view holds the resurgence of religion has become a surprisingly potent force for strengthening and consolidating group identity, particularly in light of encroaching globalization (Thomas 2009). The implications for modern governments of religious identity, especially that which is enabled or emboldened by linkages beyond the purview of the state, have attained growing importance (Rudolph).

For the most part, scholarly attention on transnational religion has centered on the implications of religious group identity and, in particular, its role in fostering groups with violent aims or that overtly seek the disruption of the state (Haynes; Thomas 2005). At the other end of the spectrum, however, are global religious networks with more benign – even “other worldly” – ambitions that may, nonetheless, exert potential influence on internal state matters, especially in developing contexts. Research has made tentative forays into the impact of volunteer interventions on host countries and their governments (Keck and Sikkink; Sherraden et al. 2008; Smith et al.). And although the governments in both sending and receiving countries may vary in the types of restrictions controlling the activities of international volunteers, the U.S. places relatively few constraints, especially on the religiously motivated activities, of its citizens that venture abroad. In fact, the U.S. government has a history of actively pursuing the protection of religious personnel through treaties with foreign governments; a provocative recent study has posited that religion actually helped shape U.S. foreign policy (Preston). Also, in a memoir about America’s religious involvement in foreign affairs, former Secretary of State Madeline Albright contends that such agreements not only gave U.S. missionaries openings for sharing their faith but also for conveying ideas about the “proper relationship between governments and the governed” (Albright and Woodward: 26).

In such ways, the United States stands out as a major world exporter of religious material, financial and personnel “flows,” largely through an unregulated private market of charitable activities but also through extensive government funding of faith-based private

voluntary organizations (Ebaugh and Chafetz; McCleary and Barro). Christian denominations based in the U.S. ostensibly benefit from this “faith-friendly” regulatory environment. There is presumably considerable divergence in the purpose of these network flows, with some advancing overt religious or evangelical aims, on the one hand, and others pursuing what might be perceived as more progressive missions like the education and empowerment of women and girls. What role, if any, volunteers play in the international efforts of denominationally sponsored activity is not clearly specified in extant research.

To summarize, international volunteering is a growing phenomenon, yet only limited research has been conducted specifically on the international volunteer activities of U.S. religionists or on the role of denominations in mobilizing such voluntary service. In a global context where transnational religion is growing in importance, the actions and motivations of U.S. religious volunteers and the organizations that sponsor them deserve more focused scholarly attention.

Research Questions

To provide a more robust picture of religious international voluntary service, this study undertakes an exploratory effort to examine several dimensions of volunteer activity by members of major Christian denominations based in the U.S. Based on available research described above, the study delves into the following questions of interest:

1. *To what extent are members of U.S. denominations involved in international volunteer service?* The study begins by addressing basic questions about the scope and type of international volunteer activities undertaken by adherents of these religious groups. Although we may understand general attributes of international volunteering overall (as described previously), we have less specific information about volunteer activity undertaken through the auspices of formal religious bodies.

2. *What is the role in international volunteer mobilization played by the denominational hierarchy?* For example, does the denomination offer training in volunteer service abroad or provide insurance coverage to volunteers? As mainline denominations, in particular, experience diminished resources as a result of declining membership, we might expect to see volunteers increasingly utilized as a cost-effective alternative to professional missionary staff.

3. *Does volunteering by religious adherents contribute in some way to sustaining or strengthening international denominational bonds?* Many U.S. denominations maintain international ties to sister institutions abroad. Conceivably, formal religious bodies engaged in networked relationships across the globe may utilize voluntary service to continue such relationships and, possibly, sponsor volunteer opportunities in the U.S. in return for individuals and groups from other countries. Alternatively, for those religious bodies with only informal or no such linkages, we would want to know how volunteers are channeled into the international service field.

4. *Do the humanitarian agencies directly affiliated with denominations utilize volunteers, as well?* A number of U.S. denominations provide substantial support for affiliated humanitarian and relief organizations serving as professionally administered agencies, some which receive government funding. Although these agencies are often operated independently of denominational authority, they are heavily reliant on the financial support of church

members. The study conducts preliminary inquiry into whether religiously motivated volunteers are also drawn into international activity through these agents.

5. *Has the denomination adopted formal statements of position on political issues regarding various countries and regions that may affect the service of volunteers?* Many formal religious bodies like the U.S. denominations in the study engage in some form of democratic decision-making influenced by the ideology of members and leaders; as a consequence, denominations often take formal positions on international issues. Denominational involvement in international voluntary service may in fact be a sensitive issue, given contemporary views on religious and cultural diversity or the right of emerging nations toward self-determination. The study concludes by tentatively asking about the ideological positions suggested by such decisions and how these might affect the volunteer activity of adherents. These five questions guided the study and structured the findings and accompanying analysis that follow.

Methods, Sample, and Procedures

The overall aim of the study was to identify denominational actions and behaviors that contribute to the incidence of international voluntary service (hereafter, IVS) by U.S. religionists. To investigate the scope and extent of denominational involvement in the mobilization of IVS, the study took an exploratory approach, employing a comparative cross-sectional multiple case design (Yin) to describe and analyze relevant phenomena occurring in major U.S. denominations. Data were drawn from multiple sources (web sites, a survey, and in-depth interviews) to address the guiding research questions.

Table 1: U.S. Protestant Denominations Included in Sample

Denomination	Membership (year)	Denominational Classification
American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.	1.3 mil (2011)	Mainline
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	691,160 (2008)	Mainline
Episcopal Church	2.0 mil (2011)	Mainline
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	4.5 mil (2011)	Mainline
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	2.3 mil (2011)	Evangelical
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	2.8 mil (2011)	Mainline
Reformed Church in America	268,815 (2005)	Mainline
United Church of Christ	1.0 mil (2011)	Mainline
United Methodist Church	7.8 mil (2011)	Mainline

Source: *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (Lindner)

The sample was composed of nine U.S. Protestant denominations and represents a broad cross-section of formally recognized Christian bodies, including denominations characterized by a theologically conservative orientation as well as more liberal denominations. Together, the official membership of these denominations represents almost 20 percent (18.1%) of all Protestant Christians in the U.S. affiliated with a formal church

body (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life). Table 1 provides basic descriptive information about these denominations.

Research has consistently shown a strong correlation between religious adherence and volunteering, and Protestants have frequently been the focus of such research due to their relatively high levels of regular church attendance as an important measure of religiosity. Interestingly, recent research suggests that volunteering (not necessarily abroad) predisposes U.S. church members toward more altruistic foreign policies (Wuthnow and Lewis). However, U.S. Protestants are deeply divided over the aims of social activism, despite a common heritage in progressive movements of the 19th century (Park and Smith). Presumably, their volunteer activities, whether international or at home, reflect these differences as well, with possible implications for the type of foreign interventions advocated by these groups.

The denominations were selected because of their orientation as mainline Protestant denominations or whether they were found among the top 25 recognized faith groups with updated or comparable membership information for 2011, according to the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (Lindner). For purposes of comparability, only Protestant denominations were selected. As a result, the nation's largest religious group, the Catholic Church, with 68.5 million members, was not included. Also, several denominations were excluded from the analysis because of considerable differences in church polity: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (6.0 million members), Jehovah's Witnesses (1.2 million members), and Seventh-Day Adventist (1.0 million members). Ideally, subsequent research would include these major faith traditions.

As indicated previously, data for the study were derived from organizational evidence (denominational websites), a preliminary survey administered electronically to key denominational informants, as well as follow-up interviews with these same informants to probe more in-depth. The survey was developed specifically for the study and included questions covering a range of general volunteer management concerns and issues (recruiting, training, risk management, deployment, etc.). In addition, the survey included items more narrowly tailored for religiously motivated volunteerism based on prior research involving one denomination's utilization of international volunteers (Kinney). The study, survey instrument, and interview protocol received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for use of human subjects in research.

The denominations' webpages identified the likely staff member responsible for overseeing international volunteer activity; telephone and/or email contact verified the appropriate denominational informant. These individuals reflected a diverse range of attributes and experience: the informants included a mix of male and female, ordained and lay persons, younger staff members and seasoned church professionals. Most were long-term (more than five years) denominational staff but not all had consistently served in an international or missions capacity. Over a two-month period in early 2012, these denominational representatives were asked to participate first in a brief survey followed by a telephone interview. A total of six interviews were conducted; two denominations, the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples), work together to undertake international mission activities. In lieu of surveys or interviews, information was retrieved

from the websites of two additional denominations because representatives were either unavailable or a position was vacant. The interviews, all but one conducted by telephone, lasted between 45 and 72 minutes and were digitally recorded for subsequent analysis. Most of the findings reported here are based on the answers to the survey and the in-depth interviews.

In keeping with the study's deductive design, analysis of data was conducted to identify consistent themes (Miles and Huberman) across denominations and also by applying an interactive, integrated approach (Maxwell) to qualitative data analysis rather than "pigeon-hole" findings into preconceived categories.

Findings

In general, the involvement of the central denominational authority in international volunteer service was strikingly similar in some respects and widely varied in others. All seemed to agree on one aspect, however: international service is a particularly potent theme. At the outset of the interviews with denominational representatives, participants were asked how often visual images of church members engaged in voluntary activity in distant places were found in related church publications. Communication is a central activity for most religious groups, and the widespread use of the Internet at all levels of church hierarchy emphasizes the importance of visual and graphic images. Photos of volunteers in remote and unfamiliar places are a frequent and obviously value-laden image in church publications, according to the denominational representatives who took part in the study. About half the survey respondents recalled seeing such images "more than six times" in either print or electronic church publications during the past year. Regardless of the denomination's level of involvement in international voluntary service, the sight of church members actively serving in other lands is an evocative image and expresses ideals about the work of religionists in places around the world. When asked about the message being conveyed through such visual images, one interviewee summarized it this way: "Here is your church at work globally."

International Volunteering as a Discrete Category of Activity

Differentiating volunteer service from professional mission work was a critical distinction made in the interviews and, in some instances, the administrative structure of the denominations reflected this difference. Many of the denominations represented in the study have long histories of involvement in international missionary work, some to remote reaches of Asia and Africa. Although all of the denominations continue to deploy long-term mission workers in disparate parts of the world, according to respondents, their numbers have declined as the denominations place greater reliance on local or indigenous religious authorities to carry on or direct church work. An example was cited by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America that supported 30 missionaries in Madagascar forty years ago; today, they sponsor two missionaries and provide project support instead.

The trained (primarily ordained) church workers who are deployed for long-term, international mission work were referred to as "career" missionaries by several denominational representatives. These full-time workers are considered employees of the denomination rather than volunteers and, as such, receive more administrative support than volunteers who serve episodically for periods of a year or less. Several denominations had

completely separate offices to deal with the concerns related to career missionaries, while others integrated long-term mission work with shorter-term volunteer efforts into a single office, for example, under the title of “global mission.” The organizational distinction between central office support for mission workers and volunteers extends even to some volunteers (primarily young adults in year-long assignments) who receive a modest stipend during their service.

The economic recession of 2008 had a serious impact on the financial allocation of funds by denominations to global mission activities either paid or voluntary. However, funding had been in decline for many of the denominations prior to the recession. Although at least three denominational respondents pointed to increased demand for international volunteer service opportunities, most reported a reduction in the number of staff to support or facilitate such activity. Four of the staff members said they had been in their current position overseeing volunteer service for less than two years. Five interviewees had records of ten years or more working at the denominational level in capacities related to global mission and service, but they added that changes in organizational structure had led to a reassignment that included volunteer service.

Results from the advance survey showed the types of activity most frequently undertaken by volunteers through denominational channels were 1) education and training (children’s programs and English language tutoring, for example); 2) housing and shelter construction; and 3) health services. Four denominations reported that volunteers take part in emergency relief, but further probing during the in-depth interviews indicated that volunteers are utilized well after an emergency (e.g., a natural disaster or urgent conflict situation) has transitioned to a rebuilding phase. Representatives of three denominations said volunteers were involved in evangelization or religious instruction, but they qualified their answers to either specify “youth programs in churches” or “religious instruction but not evangelization.” Other volunteer activities cited less frequently were clergy support and training (2 denominations) and water and sanitation improvements (1 denomination). One denominational staff member indicated that volunteers had been involved in “building the missional relationship” with long-term mission workers. As he explained, some of their international volunteers were deployed “not to ‘do something’ like build a school but deepen the relationship with a missionary.” He added that learning first-hand about a country and the affiliated church there could be a meaningful volunteer experience in itself.

The length of time an individual or group spends abroad in volunteer service mostly determined whether or to what extent the denomination had a role in volunteer deployment. All the denominations reported some level of involvement in volunteer service of three months’ or more duration. Very short-term assignments (such as weekend or one-week mission trips) were less likely even to come to the attention of denominational headquarters, the denominational representatives acknowledged: church members also join episodic volunteer efforts organized at the congregational level or through a myriad of para-church organizations. However, only two denominations reported no involvement whatsoever in short-term (1–8 weeks) volunteer service, although the range and type of interaction varied significantly.

In general, most international volunteer service conducted with denominational involvement is concentrated in the western hemisphere, largely due to time and financial constraints of volunteers. Understandably, the Caribbean and Central America are much easier destinations to reach by volunteers from the U.S. who may use their own vacation time and, quite probably, cover the costs of their travel. According to respondents, denominations rarely provide direct financial assistance to cover the costs of short-term volunteer service; only in instances of dire need (post-earthquake reconstruction in Haiti or Japan, for example) are funds made available to volunteers. Denominational resources (either from general operating funds or special appeals) are used primarily to staff the offices of global mission that oversee volunteer and/or missionary activity.

Role of the Denomination in Mobilizing IVS

Training for international volunteers is one aspect of denominational involvement in mobilization explored in the interviews. One of the smaller denominations, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, offers training sessions for congregations and teams preparing to embark on stints of short-term service. Several denominations have developed printed or electronic training materials for international volunteers. One of the larger denominations, the United Methodist Church, has developed a “Volunteers in Mission” manual that is regularly updated and, due to the denomination’s size and structure, used to “train the trainers” of international service teams. The manual includes information about the spiritual aspects of international mission as well as instruction in cultural sensitivity and practical “do’s and don’ts” for those staying in foreign settings. The Presbyterian Church USA provides no direct training or preparation for short-term volunteers but serves as a clearinghouse of information about service opportunities abroad. Church members can view pages on the denomination’s website that list requests for service volunteers from affiliates around the world. According to the staff member responsible for the online listings, these “international pages” are some of the most heavily visited on the denomination’s website. The cooperative mission effort between the Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ holds training sessions for service volunteers at a half dozen places around the U.S. each year.

All of the denominational representatives acknowledged that a good deal of international volunteer service by religionists goes on either undetected by or unaffiliated with the church hierarchy. Only one denomination in the study, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, actively sought to centralize the short-term mission efforts of church members through the denominational headquarters. The staff member estimated that about 60-70 volunteer mission trips of one to two weeks’ duration took place each year across the denomination. In general, the other denominations focused fewer resources on training or support for short-term volunteer service than for longer deployments. One obvious exception was the involvement of denominations in mobilization efforts for trained, professional personnel in short-term “medical missions,” even if health services were not indicated as a priority activity. For example, the shared ministry between the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ sponsors the services of a trauma specialist volunteer who travels regularly to the Palestinian territories. Similarly, the United Methodists

sponsored medical and engineering experts to travel to Japan as volunteers following the 2011 tsunami.

As the medical mission example implies, the skill level of volunteers tends to determine the extent of denominational involvement in mobilization. Most short-term volunteer service opportunities require largely unskilled labor for activities like constructing rudimentary housing or leading children's programs. Such volunteer service is largely left to congregational or individual initiative. As one denominational staff member said, somewhat acerbically, "they already have bricklayers in Sierra Leone." Trained medical professionals are in great demand in developing countries and so the deployment of medical personnel like physicians, nurses, or technologists receives more denominational attention. According to several interviewees, the international affiliated church bodies more often request medical services than other sorts of volunteer activities and, therefore, require fewer "generic" or episodic activities involving well-intentioned but less specifically skilled volunteers.

In keeping with general empirical research by Lough, a number of denominations are actively involved in the international service of young adults. At least four of the denominations have programs in place to actively recruit and deploy individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 on volunteer service missions for up to one year. Although these young adults are often provided with a small monthly stipend, many tend to undertake this time of international service as an unpaid "gap year" experience during time off from college or between the completion of undergraduate study and subsequent training for ministry. The processes for screening and placement of the young adults are more formalized than those for short-term volunteers. Furthermore, the investment of time and resources in international service by young adults is evidence of the value placed on them as future church leaders. According to one interviewee, a number of these young adults will often serve at denominational headquarters after their return from living abroad and their presence is "energizing."

Although the involvement of denominational headquarters in international volunteer mobilization varies widely, all assume some level of responsibility for the safety of volunteers. Most denominations provide a level of insurance coverage for the potential risk to the safety and health of volunteers. Primarily, insurance is supplied to assist in emergency medical situations, when immediate care or evacuation is needed. Most of the respondents added, however, that denominations require individual volunteers to carry their own health insurance, the exception being those denominations that deploy young adults for year-long international assignments. If a mission team sponsored by a local congregation embarks on an international service trip, typically the local church (not the denomination) provides accident coverage for volunteers.

Voluntary Service and the Strength of Transnational Religious Networks

As mentioned, the denominational representatives reported that international service is a potent aspect of the church's communication to members. However, during the interviews, nearly all quickly added that the "work" being done by church volunteers was not undertaken independently but only in collaboration with local or indigenous church authorities with whom the U.S. denomination had forged a formal relationship. Interviewees stressed this point with comments like "we share doing mission in partnership," "we are

engaged with companions around the world,” and “we are not doing *for* others but *in relationship with* others” in places abroad. This concern about serving not unilaterally but in partnership with church authorities in the host country figured prominently in the interviews and, importantly, establishes the basic context from which voluntary service through most U.S. denominations takes place. To be sure, these relationships vary in terms of their formality, but the interviews consistently emphasized the importance of mutual respect. This finding underscores the value placed on the interactive nature of these relationships, rather than on voluntary service by U.S. church members, perhaps reflecting the transnational dimension of religion today as well as an intentional shift from missionary endeavors of an earlier era.

Volunteers and Affiliated Humanitarian Agencies

Obviously, the risk to health or life is greatest in situations of natural disasters and armed conflict. Likely for this reason, all of the respondents stated that volunteers are rarely utilized by the relief and development agencies affiliated with or operated by the denomination. Some of these organizations are familiar to the general public: Church World Service, ACT (All Churches Together), UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief), Lutheran World Relief. Some of these agencies are in fact intermediaries that raise funds from church members for distribution to other relief and development programs as needs are made known. The average person in the pew may have little awareness of whether the denomination is directly responsible for delivering aid or development assistance. However, individual members give (sometimes very generously) of their financial resources to various appeals for support.

Consistently, respondents indicated these professional relief organizations utilize few if any volunteers in their relief or development efforts. The United Methodist Church works across regional networks that must approve emergency intervention following disasters, when medical and other expertise is most needed. Short-term volunteers without specific training are unlikely to be utilized until well after the disaster has become a development or rebuilding effort, if then.

Ideology and Denominational Positions Affecting IVS

As shown, international volunteers are engaged through different levels of the denominational structure, in general, with short-term volunteers more likely to be mobilized at the congregational level and longer term service being orchestrated at the denominational level. Considered together, however, the actions of these prominent religious denominations in linking their members with co-religionists in other parts of the world constitute global networks of interaction. For some Protestant denominations in the U.S., the value placed on this international dimension of church service can be shown by the formal positions taken by the denomination’s governing body.

Most U.S. denominations hold regular national or regional meetings where decisions are made and actions voted upon by representatives of the denomination at large. Table 2 outlines basic descriptive information about these formal deliberative bodies. At these meetings, representatives engage in debate and decision-making about internal policy matters and, in many instances, about issues outside the church that affect society either at home or

abroad. The United Methodist Church, for example, establishes certain “social principles” that address the social or political situations of countries where volunteers may be serving. As the denomination’s respondent explained, “You can’t help people if you don’t address the social issues that affect them.” The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church-U.S.A. meets every other year and, according to its denominational representative, recently agreed to provide special support to its mission co-workers in places undergoing the turbulent “Arab spring.” The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America issued statements of support for the newly formed nation of South Sudan, largely because of the denomination’s engagement there. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was also mentioned by three respondents as a recurring concern addressed by the denomination’s policy-making body. In general, policies reflect the official position or focused areas of church concern around the world; these policies are not notably linked to volunteer involvement.

Table 2: Descriptive Details about U.S. Denominational Decision-Making Bodies

Denomination	Name of Body	Frequency of Meeting
American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.	Biennial meeting	Every two years
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	General Assembly	Every two years
Episcopal Church	General Convention	Every three years
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	Church-wide Assembly	Every two years; every three years after 2013
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	National Convention	Every three years
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	General Assembly	Every two years
Reformed Church in America	General Synod	Yearly
United Church of Christ	General Synod	Biennially
United Methodist Church	General Conference	

Sources: Denomination websites and the *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Mead, Hill, and Atwood)

In addition to the policy discussions that take place in denominational gatherings, several respondents cited the work of policy advocates in Washington, D.C. or at the United Nations as another expression of the denomination’s interests in other parts of the world where both long-term mission workers and short-term volunteers may be aiding the local church. At times, however, the interests of church members (perhaps raised at meetings of the governing body) run counter to the “official” preferences expressed by either the government relations professionals or global mission personnel employed by the denomination. For example, an initiative seeking greater recognition of Taiwan was brought forward by members of one denomination’s regional conference. This effort was eventually quashed at the denominational level because it was thought the initiative would “wreck” new and tentative possibilities to place mission workers in mainland China. In short, the rate of voluntary service by individual church members may be increasing, but formal positions taken by denominations have little discernible connection to the volunteer interests or passions of individuals. In fact, the two may occasionally be in direct opposition.

Discussion and Implications

This paper sought to address limitations in our knowledge of international voluntary service as undertaken by religious groups and adherents. By examining the role of U.S.-based Protestant denominations in promoting or sponsoring such voluntary activity, an incremental step was taken to expand understanding and, hopefully, facilitate further research. There are many types of religious organizations, and this study has investigated only the IVS involvement of Christian denominations and their hierarchies, primarily those categorized as mainline Protestant. We have much to learn about the activities of groups based in other religions as well as from the panoply of para-church and faith-based organizations.

Scope and extent of denominational IVS. To summarize findings from the present study, mainline Protestant denominations in the U.S. are directly engaged only minimally in the deployment of volunteers for international service with the exception of programs to place young adults in service settings abroad. In contrast to the long-term assignments of career missionaries, these young adult volunteers spend up to a year, on average, providing assistance to foreign churches while ostensibly gaining new and formational insight into their own vocation (likely in the church back home) but also their place in the world. Nor are volunteers widely utilized to respond to global emergencies. Most denominations are inclined to deploy volunteers only where those with highly specialized or developed medical and other professional skills are in demand.

Degree of denominational support for IVS. In general, denominations acknowledge that volunteer mobilization for international service takes place more often at the congregational or individual level. Based on that assumption, the denominations represented in the study provide a range of very limited forms of support, from training resources to minimal insurance coverage to announcements of volunteer opportunities. Only one denomination interviewed for the study, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, indicated more direct involvement – actually a desire to centralize such activity – in the mobilization of church members in voluntary service abroad.

This is not to suggest that U.S.-based Protestant denominations accrue no benefit from the engagement of their members in international voluntary service. As traditional missionary activity has declined in all these denominations in favor of more egalitarian partnerships with affiliated churches elsewhere in the world, the organizational structures of the central church authority have been modified to recognize the phenomenon of IVS even if direct support is limited. In every instance, denominations take advantage of the opportunity to exhibit in church publications various images of volunteers working in international settings, suggesting such effort reflects something about the church's continued relevance in the world. Whereas U.S. mainline denominations once had ranks of career missionaries serving in remote parts of the world, today only a fraction of that number remain for economic and theological reasons. As mainline denominations continue to decline in number of members, however, the example of individual volunteers working internationally may help perpetuate a sense of larger purpose in the world. With contractions in financial support for missions, the expense of deploying international workers has been

shifted to individual members, as the financial costs for these sporadic international interventions are borne largely by the volunteers themselves.

Role of volunteers in sustaining international denominational networks. Despite a greatly reduced missionary workforce and only marginal involvement in volunteer deployment, the denominations consistently upheld the significance of networked relationships with sister organizations in other parts of the world. This posture reflects the significance and potency of the transnational religion framework. Neither missionary work nor volunteer activity received the imprimatur of the denominational hierarchy without the expressed approval and consent of their international partners. Clearly, the deployment of either volunteer or career personnel reflects the high value placed by the U.S. denominations upon the network linkages to corresponding church authority in a host nation. Whether these network relationships operate on a level of parity between the two partners or “nodes,” it is evident that whatever biases or positions either religious authority might take on matters of social, political or economic importance must be subject to mutual agreement.

Volunteer utilization by affiliate aid agencies. Furthermore, as the findings indicate, the humanitarian and relief organizations linked to the denominations in the study do not utilize volunteers. Although every denomination in the study supports a fund-raising arm for international relief and development, disaster and/or emergency work is almost exclusively the purview of trained professionals, not volunteers. These organizations are primarily responsible for the flow of financial and material resources to regions where conflict or disaster have occurred but are reportedly quite restrictive in regard to volunteer involvement.

Given the limited involvement of the denominations or their affiliated humanitarian agencies in volunteer mobilization, it is evident that much of the voluntary service of religionists identified in research described earlier by Lough and Chaves and Anderson takes place outside the purview of denominations. That said, the lack of accountability and oversight of the vast majority of religious IVS (through alternative, non-denominationally sponsored groups) raises serious questions about the capacity of the networks formed by and between religious authorities to preclude unsolicited intervention by volunteers.

Ideological positions on international relations and volunteers. Although the study found only limited instances of denominational decision-making affecting the actions of volunteers, the tentative exploration of prevalent social or political perspectives suggests more in-depth study is needed. In particular, the matter of religious authority in various state contexts raises complex ethical and political questions well beyond the scope of this paper. However, as religiously motivated volunteers venture into unfamiliar political environments, they bring with them liberal western notions of democracy that may provide few easy or immediate answers for the disparate cultural settings where IVS takes place. In particular, U.S.-based volunteers are apt to convey a particular understanding of church-state relations that those in many developing nations will find perplexing, at best. The U.S. is known as a vigorous marketplace of religion, where competing ideas are theoretically kept in balance without domination by any one group. Achieving such equilibrium is difficult to envision in many places around the world where U.S. religionists might offer their voluntary service. Out of respect for their international network partners, in other words, should formal religious

bodies like the denominations in this study do more to direct the volunteer activities of their members?

Furthermore, religious authorities may represent a dominant social group or a ruling elite in other national contexts, especially in developing regions. The mobilization of international volunteers, with or without denominational oversight, may actually contribute to furthering unequal power relationships in some circumstances. These and other related questions need further investigation, with particular attention to differences in religion-state relationships (see Fox 2008).

However, the effects of globalization across such international networks work both ways, as Keck and Sikkink's work on volunteer-driven international advocacy suggests. Volunteers who serve internationally are as likely to form new ideas about those who live in developing societies as their host country religionists form opinions about them. As one denominational representative shared, the resulting opinion is not always favorable. Some volunteers develop negative impressions after repeated service trips abroad, the denominational respondent said, as volunteers are confronted repeatedly with the slow pace of change and the depth and persistence of problems. Furthermore, emerging research about the impact of the international service phenomenon among U.S. religious adherents suggests that short-term mission trips have little lasting effect on the beneficiary communities or on the western participants (all North Americans, in this instance) who engage in them (Ver Beek).

Clearly, denominational leaders want to be respectful of their international partners and they work to protect those network relationships. This institutional stance takes precedence over either volunteer mobilization or, perhaps more importantly, oversight. At the same time, however, church members in increasing numbers want to experience other cultures and provide meaningful service. Many choose to conduct such service outside the direct, centralized authority of the denomination. It is not clear that denominations are interested in trying to necessarily influence the intentions of members who travel abroad to conduct service under other auspices. Do denominations with international ties have a responsibility to promote understanding of the political, social and economic circumstances in the places where IVS of their church members takes place? One might draw the conclusion that if denominations wish to safeguard their international networks, they will be well-served to be attuned to the ambitions and activities of the volunteer ranks "from the pew."

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