



The Invisible Caring Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare

Ram Cnaan

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Popular calls to transform our current welfare system and supplant it with effective and inexpensive faith-based providers are gaining political support and engendering heated debate about the separation of church and state. Yet we lack concrete information from which to anticipate how such initiatives might actually work if adopted.

Despite the assumption that congregations can help many needy people in our society, it remains to be seen how extensive they wish their involvement to be, or if they have the necessary tools to become significant providers in the social service arena. Moreover, how will such practices, which will move faith-based organizations towards professionalization, ultimately affect the spirit of volunteerism now prevalent in America's religious institutions?

We lack sufficient knowledge about congregational life and its ability to play a key role in social service provision. **The Invisible Caring Hand** attempts to fill that void. Based on in-depth interviews with clergy and lay leaders in 251 congregations nationwide, it reveals the many ways in which congregations are already working, beneath the radar, to care for people in need. This ground-breaking volume will provide much-sought empirical data to social scientists, religious studies scholars, and those involved in the debates over the role of faith-based organizations in faith-based services, as well as to clergy and congregation members themselves.

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