



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

[Pets for Life]

PETSMART
Charities



x Engaging Faith Community

"The whole point of learning about the human race, presumably, is to give it mercy."—Reynolds Price



Because faith leaders' voices are heavily weighted in under-served communities, many outside organizations and businesses often compete for their attention and influence. The advantage you have is your organization's genuine desire to serve without expecting personal gain.

x Engaging Faith Community

Churches, synagogues, and mosques frequently serve as anchors to under-served neighborhoods. They supply crucial resources—such as food, childcare, and workforce development—as well as many other essential threads that make up the fabric of the community.

More than 60% of the world's population identify themselves as religious or belonging to a spiritual community. This high percentage and the long-standing religious tradition of care and concern for animals are reasons to include faith organizations in your outreach. But even more compelling is the notion that faith organizations are often influential both spiritually and socially. Churches, synagogues, and mosques frequently serve as anchors to under-served neighborhoods. They supply crucial resources—such as food, childcare, and workforce development—as well as many other essential threads that make up the fabric of the community.



 Bishop Dr. Rev. Saffo



Background Information

Unlike more affluent areas, under-resourced communities are likely to have several places of worship within a few city blocks. Congregation sizes vary widely; some houses of worship might be no larger than an average living room. The spiritual leaders of these smaller congregations may not be full-time employees of the church, synagogue, or mosque and will likely not have any full-time administrative assistance. In these communities, the local pastor, imam, rabbi, or priest may also be the high school's track coach, mail carrier, or local retail manager.

These leaders often hold an additional responsibility, serving as the unofficial head of the community's safety net. In this role, spiritual leaders often find themselves organizing hunger relief, advocating for and against political policies that affect their community, actively mentoring neighborhood youth, advising congregants on healthcare options, and in some cases, refereeing warring neighborhood factions. In short, in under-resourced communities, spiritual leaders often care for many outside their immediate congregation. They're both community and spiritual leaders, but they have few resources for either role. Understanding customs or traditions relating to a particular faith organization is helpful, but being authentic is most important. Your outreach strategy to these organizations must take into account the competing priorities faith leaders handle.

Any delay in returning your email, phone call, or letter should not be automatically taken as lack of interest. Be patient and politely check back periodically.

Congregation leaders are often bombarded with requests from outside organizations to pass on information to their parishioners. In too many cases, these requests are designed to benefit those making the requests, and not necessarily the parishioners. For this reason, the role of “propaganda gatekeeper”—someone who filters all the messaging the congregation receives and decides which is truly relevant and needed—is often taken on by these influential leaders. Keep in mind that the nature of gatekeeping naturally lends itself to suspicion; try not to be offended by initial distrust or lack of communication. Proper vetting takes time. By being understanding and giving organizations the time they need, you'll ensure that your mission—to truly help people in the community—is obvious to faith leaders. Once that's clear, many of these organizations will become overwhelmingly helpful and engaged.



Understand What You Want from Faith Leaders and Organizations



 Cathy Wells

As in every other area of your work and outreach, your goal is to build relationships and provide resources and information to people and their pets. The same goal exists with faith organizations, so be clear about your genuine desire to serve without expecting personal or organizational gain. Share what your organization has to offer to the parishioners and their pets. Be patient and careful not to force things to happen too quickly. Building a strong network with faith organizations will most likely take some time, but it's well worth the investment.

Benefits of faith community engagement:

- Organizations may allow your organization to speak to their parishioners/followers.
- Leaders may encourage parishioners to follow your program directives.
- Organizations may host events sponsored by your organization.
- Leaders may deliver sermons focused on your organization's principles.
- Organizations may supply or encourage volunteers to help your organization.
- Organizations may share their mailing lists or may insert messages pertaining to your organization in their communications.



How to Reach Out to Faith Organizations

- Be organized. When doing your community assessment, make sure your map includes the faith organizations in your neighborhoods. Create a spreadsheet that includes the organization's name, contact information, name(s) of congregation leadership, contact person, denomination, and check boxes to track the number of times you contact the organization and the results of each attempt. Note that some churches have secretaries, administrative assistants, receptionists, office managers, or even associate pastors who answer phones and coordinate church logistics. Never underestimate the important role that these people play in the relationship you are trying to build.
- You don't need to become an expert in the particular beliefs and histories of each religious denomination. But you should take the time to understand the basic practices of any religious organization you approach and be respectful of their traditions. Having a religious lifestyle could be an advantage in the conversation. If you do not have a religious background and have limited understanding of religion generally, do your research. If you have a volunteer within your group who has a lifestyle more inclusive of religion, consider working in partnership with this person when approaching these organizations.
- Most faith organizations within the community will be aware of and in contact with the others. There are often overlaps in worship and socializing, so if the leader of one organization sees the benefit of your work and what you are offering, word will likely move quickly throughout the faith community.
- Assuming you feel comfortable with places of worship outside your own and you have the time to do so, visit a worship service or event before making formal contact with its leadership. Garner as much information as you can regarding the organization's history, community activism, and leadership structure. This is not spying; it's simply gathering information that will allow you to present your program more sensitively and effectively. There are simply too many nuances in the beliefs and practices of various faith groups to assume you have a good understanding without visiting them. Introduce yourself to nearby parishioners at the appropriate time. If appropriate, speak with parishioners about their pet(s) if they have one and the topic comes up. Glean what you can in regard to how the organization approaches outside community organizers. Larger faith organizations often have an outreach ministry already in place.
- As noted above, faith leaders in under-served communities have limited time and resources and are frequently approached by outside organizations. For these reasons, any communication about your program's benefits must be clear, concise, and transparent. The faith leader must know immediately that you want to serve—not use—the community. When contacting a large house of worship, be prepared to speak with an assistant or secretary before being able to speak with or meet with the organization's leader.

While you should make regular follow-up calls to build a relationship, it is best to first send materials explaining your program to not only the pastor, rabbi, imam, or priest, but also, if applicable, to

their assistant and/or the organization's secretary. Any materials you send should highlight positive reactions to the program from other faith leaders. For example, if a faith leader attended a clinic you held in the neighborhood, include images or quotes from that experience in your flyers. You can also send bullet points to be included in the faith organization's newsletter.

- When speaking to faith leaders or church staff about your work helping animals, be sure to mention the significant bond many people share with their pets. Discuss how helping animals directly helps the people who love them. Understanding that under-served communities often struggle with a number of social issues—making it difficult to put animal care on the priority list—is important when building relationships with faith organizations. Share stories of what you offer and the impact of your work, but be sensitive to the critical life stresses many of these communities face. Convey the appreciation and gratification people feel when they are able to provide essential care for their pets. As with every part of your work, including the human component in the equation is necessary.
- Most importantly, be patient. There is no need to request full engagement in the first conversation, particularly if you sense hesitation. Invite the leaders to your facilities or an event hosted by your organization ensuring that this is not a time-consuming endeavor, merely a walk-through or quick visit.

As with all aspects of this toolkit, consistency is the most reliable technique you can employ. While total engagement is the end goal, do not expect this reaction overnight. Should the faith organization be slow to respond or decline being a part of your program, continue to canvass the neighborhood surrounding the house of worship, and periodically send information and success stories to faith leaders. They will likely come around once they see you are there to stay and are sincerely invested in helping their community.

Below are some additional resources to consult regarding faith organizations as they relate to animal welfare:

Explore and order HSUS Faith Outreach resources: *The Fill the Bowl Project*, *Eating Mercifully*, *Humane Backyard for Faith Communities* and the seasonal *St. Francis Day in a Box!*; Research the connection between animals and faith in the largest religious denominations nationwide through *The HSUS Religious Statements on Animals* online library; sign up for *The Humane Steward* monthly newsletter and visit HSUS Faith Outreach at www.humanesociety.org/faith.

 [The Humane Steward](#)

 [Churches Go to the Dogs \(And Cats\)](#)

Notes > Engaging the Faith Community

