

Responding to poverty: A faith-based tool

by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [June 14, 2003](#) issue

Welfare reform has triggered experimentation by states, which are responsible for its administration, and copious research about what works. In this search for effective answers, the prevailing way of thinking about welfare and poverty has also cast a spotlight on religious congregations and the potential support they provide. Amy Sherman of the Hudson Institute, who has researched faith-based social service programs extensively, says that welfare reform has been a success insofar as it has changed how society thinks about helping the poor. She agrees that welfare reform is related to the larger issue of poverty reduction and that the social conversation about poverty needs to continue and broaden.

“I think that welfare reform should always be talked about in the larger context of winning the war against poverty,” says Sherman, a proponent of faith-based solutions. “We want to get beyond what we started. We want to keep tracking and we don’t want to leave the working poor behind.”

Arthur E. Farnsley II, a senior research associate for the Polis Center at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis who has also studied congregations and social services, is cautious about how much can be expected of congregations. Religious congregations do change lives, but they are effective precisely because they are religious. “Congregations can change people’s values, but they do so in a religious way,” he says. “They don’t change values in general Monday through Friday, and then do something different on Sunday.”

Looking to churches to resolve poverty may be unrealistic. “There seems to be an assumption that there is a secret source of energy in congregations,” says Farnsley, author of the recently published book *Rising Expectations: Urban Congregations, Welfare Reform and Civic Life*. “It’s just not true.”

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