

# RESEARCH REFLECTION

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*Disaster Relief:  
Demonstrating Jesus' Love in Deed and Word*

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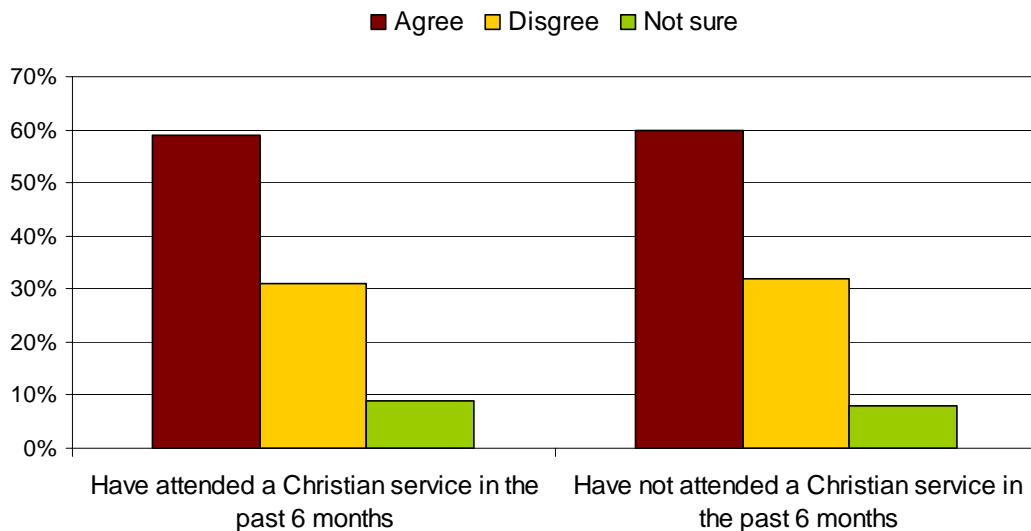
**Center for Missional Research**

In the wake of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the recent tornadoes in Greensburg, Kansas, and the even more recent wildfires in Georgia and Florida, faith-based disaster relief units like Southern Baptist Disaster Relief are often the first teams on the ground in offering assistance. As these teams share a cup of water in Jesus' name, how is their service viewed by the general public? Do victims of natural disasters appreciate being served by groups like Southern Baptist Disaster Relief? How does the public feel about the gospel message being shared in conjunction with home repairs, emergency food assistance, and shelter for evacuees?

To get at the answers of these and other disaster relief questions, the Center for Missional Research, with the assistance of Zogby International, asked a series of disaster relief questions in September 2006 and more recently in May 2007. In each survey, more than 1,000 respondents were asked questions related to their opinions of faith-based humanitarian organizations assisting in disaster areas.

Of particular interest to Southern Baptist Disaster Relief organizers, our September 2006 poll<sup>1</sup> asked respondents on their agreement or disagreement over faith-based disaster relief ministries being included in a government-written National Response Plan for disaster response. Typically, this plan is driven by FEMA. A moderate level majority of Americans (59%) agree that this is appropriate. Surprisingly, even when comparing church goers with non-church goers (see graph below), the 59 percent agreement level for each category remains constant. Apparently, involvement in a local church does not sway public opinion on this issue one way or the other.

Do you agree or disagree that it is appropriate for faith-based disaster relief ministries to be included in a government-written National Response Plan for disaster response?

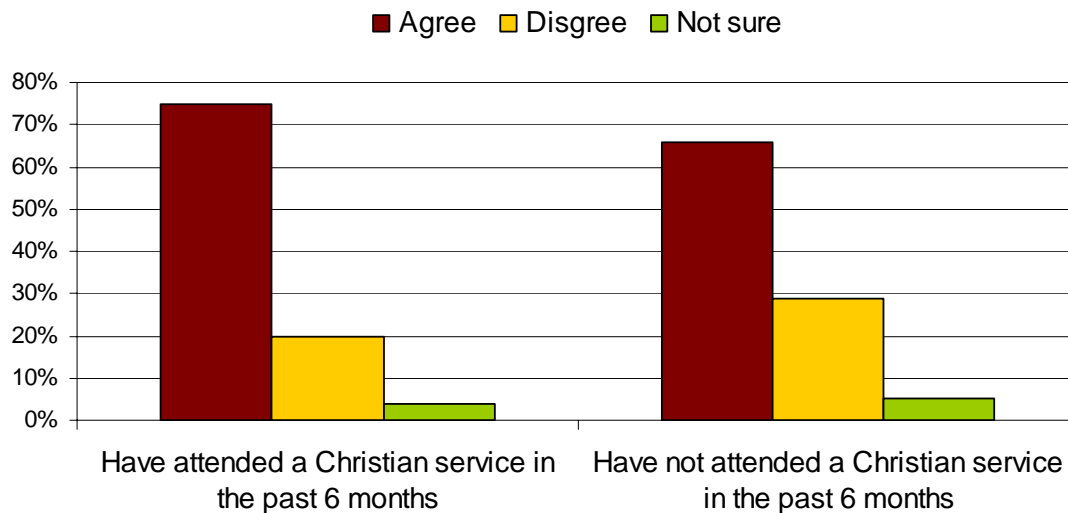


Although Christians are first responsible to Christ's call to share the gospel, often a question of concern for many workers on the field is how the American public may perceive their ministry when tangible assistance is mixed with evangelism. In our September 2006 poll, a surprising majority of Americans (72%) agreed that it is appropriate for faith-based disaster relief workers to share their faith as part of their ministry to disaster victims. Even when

<sup>1</sup> The September 2006 poll was conducted by Zogby International with 1,000 randomly select respondents representing a margin of error of +/- 3.2 percentage points.

separating out those who had not attended a Christian church service in the past six months, 66 percent of non-church goers still believed this to be appropriate. These encouraging numbers should remove any concern of disaster relief workers in sharing the awesome love of Jesus in word as well as in action.

Do you agree or disagree that it is appropriate for faith-based disaster relief workers to share their faith as part of their ministry to disaster victims?



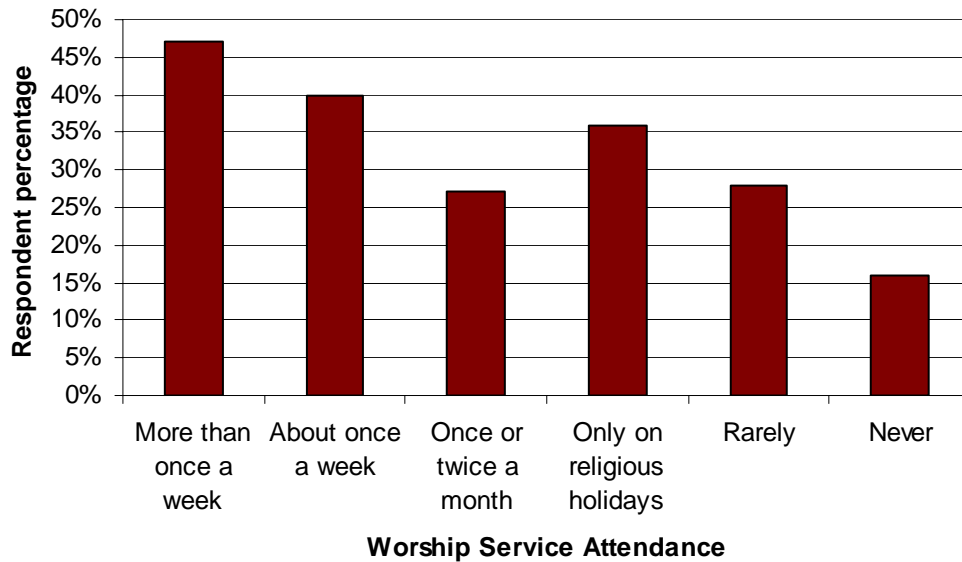
Public opinion is one thing, but the reality on the ground can be a completely different situation. Therefore, the Center for Missional Research probed a bit deeper in its latest round of polling.<sup>2</sup> Respondents were asked if, in the event of becoming a victim to a natural disaster, they would accept help from a faith-based organization. Although this is a hypothetical question, an overwhelming majority (93%) were agreeable to having a faith-based organization help them in their time of need. The percentage of respondents open to having disaster help from a faith-based organization remained above 90 percent regardless of income, age, or education levels. It is impossible to know if this would be true in a real disaster situation, but one would only expect the percentage to rise even higher when an individual is facing such desperate need.

The preceding questions demonstrate the importance of organizations like Southern Baptist Disaster Relief in the North American context: Their work is generally appreciated by the American public, public opinion finds it appropriate for evangelism to be held in tandem with tangible assistance, and victims of natural disaster will gladly receive help from faith-based organizations. Therefore, wouldn't it be safe to assume that the largest faith-based disaster relief organization serving in North America would be a household name? When respondents were asked if they were aware that Southern Baptist Disaster Relief units offer humanitarian services, 33 percent stated they were aware of Southern Baptist Disaster Relief services. It is not surprising that Southern Baptist Disaster Relief is best known in the southern states where 45 percent of respondents are aware of its services.

<sup>2</sup> The poll for this question and one regarding awareness of Southern Baptist Disaster Relief was conducted by Zogby International in May 2007 among 1,209 randomly selected respondents. This provides for a margin of error of +/- 2.9 percentage points.

Although respondents represent a variety of denominational and religious affiliations, it would be expected that the “faithful” would be more likely to know about Southern Baptist Disaster Relief. When breaking down awareness of Southern Baptist Disaster Relief by worship attendance rates (see graph below), it is true that those who attend at least one worship service a week are more likely to have heard about Southern Baptist Disaster Relief. Most interesting is that even those who rarely or never attend a worship service are still aware of Southern Baptist Disaster Relief (28% and 16% respectfully). The Southern Baptist Disaster Relief story seems to be getting out to the American public.

Awareness of Southern Baptist Disaster Relief by worship attendance



As this ministry of disaster relief continues to influence lives with the gospel, may its workers be bold in their faith and know that their actions and words have not gone unnoticed by the people and country they serve.