



STREET SAINTS

Renewing America's Cities



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To my husband, Winston,
whose pursuit of the true, the good and the beautiful
makes all things new through love.

Philippians 4:8

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Foreword

Some of the most inspiring work in America is being done quietly in our cities, without much fanfare. There are courageous, motivated citizens reaching out to their neighbors in need with authentic compassion. These “street saints” are among America’s great unsung heroes. The work they are doing in serving the least, the last, and the lost brings renewal that comes from the deepest well of human change: the human heart.

Years in public service have taught me that there are many things government can do well. The terms I spent in the House and Senate of the United States presented many opportunities to be a part of initiatives that have made a difference. But I have not forgotten an encounter I had in a government hearing in 1984 in Macon, Georgia. It was a defining moment when a humble pastor said to me, “What you do in Congress has limits. You can put a roof over our head, and food on the table. You can provide material aid. But you can’t touch people’s heads and hearts. You can’t touch the spirit and the soul. Unless you deal with the whole person, you can’t help them.” That statement launched a journey over the past twenty years that has led me to think differently about these issues, and to seek out the people who can go deep enough to change lives. There are some things the government can do, and others it simply cannot.

That encounter pointed me toward agents of healing who can reach the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. Street saints are working as mentors in neighborhoods across America, providing encouragement for neglected youngsters. They are helping families find work or leave addiction. They are encouraging men released from prison to lead productive lives and to never return to crime. These people of faith are taking neigh-

borhoods back from the drug dealers and creating oases of peace with the power of conviction. Experience has shown me that the best thing we can do is to foster their work of renewal of individual lives.

The issues that afflict our cities are not limited to the poorer neighborhoods. There is a poverty of spirit that affects America, cutting across boundaries of income, race, education, and geography. Social maladies know no borders, and the human wreckage that is left behind as families implode and moral standards evaporate cripples rich and poor alike. Addiction and unruly adolescents are not determined by zip codes. America's cultural decay indicates that we are no longer the shining city on a hill that we once were. The kind of work that reaches not only material need, but also the human heart, is necessary to renew the soul of the nation.

One of the manifestations of the modern mind is to seek policy solutions to human problems while ignoring the deeper motivation of human lives. It is clear that despite all our well-intended efforts, many of the efforts to eradicate poverty and heal the social maladies in America for the past forty years have not been successful. Some of these policies have actually made the problems worse. I saw this up close in Chicago just after my undergraduate studies, when I worked for a consulting firm charged with implementing President Johnson's Great Society programs. I went door-to-door in poor neighborhoods trying to convince the residents that it was a good thing that their apartments were going to be bulldozed and replaced with high-rise public housing. Some of them wept at the news. I didn't understand why they preferred their chaotic neighborhood to the clean new high-rises in the photographs I showed them. But their objections proved irrelevant. The bulldozers came and the new, sterile buildings the people were forced to move into became uninhabitable over time. The human misery that resulted from that social experiment shaped my understanding of government in a profound way.

Whatever antibodies that community had to combat its social maladies were crushed—not only by the bulldozer, but by the hubris that claims that governments can remake human beings. We replaced a generation of fathers with welfare checks, which has left whole pockets of our

cities fatherless. When government took over the care of the poor, private charities were often crowded out. And as we centralized our social services in the government, the private voluntary sector shrank. We are still trying to undo the damage that was done, which now stretches into the third generation in our cities.

The failure of these policies to lift people from poverty is obvious to many, regardless of their political affiliation or race. Some of the most outspoken critics have been those afflicted themselves. And while some are still fixated on formulating the ideal government policy to try to solve these problems, others are thinking about what a compassionate alternative to government largesse looks like. There is an important place for both public and private solutions. A truly compassionate alternative seeks a greater engagement of the private sector, as well as the removal of political obstacles for the practitioners at the street level.

The Welfare Reform Act of the Bill Clinton administration and the Faith-Based Initiative of the George W. Bush administration are two different but related efforts to return the care of the poor to the people closest to them, in their own states and neighborhoods. Decentralizing care moves the interaction closer to the recipients, and to a human face. The current Bush administration has taken strides to level the playing field for faith-based groups working at the grassroots to compete for government contracts to provide social services on even footing with secular providers. Faith-based providers of human services who seek government funding for the portion of their program that is faith-neutral in nature should not be discriminated against. Because faith-based groups are able to solve some problems that have not responded to any other solutions, they should be given a chance to compete fairly for funding to do their work, which fulfills an important civic purpose.

Faith is an agent of change, and that change has a civic value. Every group that reduces the recidivism of prisoners is reducing crime, lowering the public cost of incarceration, and returning parents to nurture their children, making those children less likely to follow their parents into jail. Every group that helps people leave drug addiction returns citizens to

work as taxpayers who can lead productive lives, no longer driven by the compulsion to steal to support a destructive habit. Every group that convinces teenagers to abstain from sex before marriage prevents illegitimacy, sexually transmitted diseases, and child poverty. People of faith have a persuasive track record in these areas, and they are contributing to a better quality of life for our fellow citizens. Their work has a clear civic value—serving the common good, demonstrated in the lives that are changed for the better.

Another thing we can do is to encourage private support of faith-based organizations by expanding the charitable deduction for contributions to nonprofits. This puts the giving power back into the hands of individual citizens, who are free to seek out the street saints in their own communities and support their work. The best solution for funding faith-based organizations is for neighbors to support privately the successful efforts in their own towns with their own money, time, and talent. The more private giving that is released, the healthier our nation will be.

I believe that every neighborhood has been gifted with strengths for its own healing. The talents and convictions of people whose own fates are affected by their actions are best applied to solutions they devise themselves. The one institution that has remained solid in our cities is the church. Many of the neighborhood healers who have the strength to revitalize the city around them are motivated by their faith. How can we—creatively but not intrusively—strengthen faith-based organizations working at the grassroots level in our cities? It is an important question, rooted in the paradox of our free institutions, which rest on the fruits of faith but cannot produce them.

So much of the recent debate on faith-based organizations has centered on the relationship to government funding. But the question that has not yet been fully answered is: What can the private sector do to foster the growth of the faith-based groups? The answer to that question provides a meeting point for thinkers who have stepped outside conventional approaches, left or right, to find truth that transcends political ideology.

The deepest renewal does not come from public policy, but from neighborhoods, families, churches, and local institutions. The best thing government can do is to foster the growth and health of these little platoons, and then get out of their way. Government can remove obstacles and provide incentives to encourage private support of their activities, but no government can ever take the place of the engagement of individuals in face-to-face encounters. As individuals in churches and charities across the country are caring for their neighbors, they are renewing the soul of the nation.

Although this kind of activity is not as common as it was a generation ago, it is still producing cohesiveness in a culture that is centrifugally disintegrating. Participating in civil society is like exercising a muscle: if you do not use it, it atrophies. The civic muscle of contemporary America has lost its earlier prowess. But if it can be further strengthened, its potential is a mighty force for renewal.

For free institutions to function well, America depends on the personal strengths of individuals. Founder Samuel Adams wrote, “Religion and good morals are the only solid foundation of public liberty and happiness.”¹ But the government itself is incapable of instilling the virtue necessary for our country to thrive. Although we depend on the social capital of voluntary associations, government cannot create them or make them flourish. This is where street saints, working at the grassroots level of our communities, are effective and necessary: they are building up civil society. As we participate in the care of our neighbors, we are training the moral habits of the heart. Alexis de Tocqueville said if this activity “does not lead the will directly to virtue, it establishes habits which unconsciously turn it that way.”²

Faith is the most powerful source of motivation for the care of one’s neighbor. I believe the root of the solution for renewal in America is in the end spiritual. The people who are living out their faith in compassion are beacons of light, illuminating the landscape around them. They are transforming our cities one person at a time, while building up civil society. The remarkable people who are doing this kind of work are worthy of our

attention and support. I have been privileged to meet many of them, and invite you to do the same in the following pages with Barbara Elliott as your guide.

Daniel R. Coats

April 2004

Daniel R. Coats has been the U.S. Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany since 2001. He represented the state of Indiana in the U.S. Senate from 1989 to 1999, and in the House of Representatives from 1981 to 1988.

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Introduction

Come on a visit into a world so hidden away it's almost invisible. It could be in the city where you live, and you may have driven past it for years. It's both beautiful and tough, heartbreaking and inspiring. It's the world of street saints. Street saints are on the front lines of our communities, serving the broken, the forgotten, the abandoned, and the abused. They are binding the wounds of battered women and children, feeding the hungry, and leading addicts out of captivity.

A street saint is someone who is willing to go where there is pain and suffering and be a presence of healing with love. Street saints are walking into drug-infested neighborhoods to broker truces between gang members. They are scooping up heroin and crack addicts from our cities' streets and loving them back into wholeness. They are giving a hand to families in transition from welfare into work and productivity. They are coming into schools to put their arms around and mentor at-risk children. Street saints who are victims of crime are walking into our prisons to confront prisoners face-to-face so they will not commit crimes again. They are giving immigrants language skills and entrepreneurial training so they can support themselves. Street saints are renewing the soul of America's cities.

Street saints are very different kinds of people. Bob Muzikowski is an insurance executive who loves baseball and founded a league and a school for the kids in the inner-city neighborhood he moved into. Freddie Garcia left his heroin addiction and now helps thousands of others to do the same. Kathy Foster is a nun who cares for abandoned and abused children. Wilson Goode is a former mayor whose father was imprisoned; he has founded a mentoring program for children of prisoners. Gib Vestal is

an investment banker turned construction boss for an athletic facility for inner-city kids. Brian King was a gang member in shootouts—he now counsels parents whose children have been killed. Sylvia Bolling is a speech pathologist now renewing the impoverished neighborhood she came from.

Street saints are doctors and jazz musicians, teachers and preachers, stockbrokers and manufacturers. They may be Latino, African American, Asian, or Anglo. Some are Presbyterian or Pentecostal, Roman Catholic or Mennonite, charismatic or Baptist, Nazarene or nondenominational.¹ Street saints are reconcilers among the races and bridges over denominational chasms, offering unity where there is division in an increasingly balkanized country.

There is no single educational background to equip them. Ivy leaguers with Ph.D.s find themselves working side by side with savvy high school dropouts, former addicts, and ex-drug dealers who have an education from the streets no doctoral program could ever offer. Some street saints stayed in the neighborhoods they came from and are effective because they know the people, the problems, and the dynamics there. Others have relocated from the suburbs into the inner city, taking their families with them, in order to be close to those they serve. They have found that living in the same zip code gives them authenticity.²

Street saints are modern-day manifestations of the Good Samaritan. When they see a person who has been damaged, instead of walking by, they stop to bandage his or her wounds and provide care until he or she can stand again. The wounds may be physical, psychological, or emotional; in any case, they are crippling. The people who help alleviate the pain heal with faith as their motivation and love as their method.

Americans sprang into action when the hijacked planes smashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on the fateful September 11 of 2001. The flames seared our souls as people leapt from windows to a ghastly death, and as firefighters heroically charged up the stairwells laden with sixty pounds of equipment to rescue others at the

expense of their own lives. We cheered for their heroism with a lump in our throats and with a deep admiration that we had almost forgotten in this jaded age.

Something was still smoldering, deep in the American soul, which was reignited by the fiery explosions of September 11. Embers of resilience and greatness were lit again, blazing forth in heroism and sacrifice for others. Our sense of unity, fractured by many “isms” and numbed by complacency, was recovered. Ashes covered our faces, and we were no longer black or white or brown, but one shade of gray. In that moment, there were no more hyphenated Americans. We prayed together in grief, one people, crying out to God in a wail of incomprehension. Our political representatives stood shoulder to shoulder before the Capitol, joined hands over their party divisions, and sang “God Bless America” with one voice. Suddenly, we were one nation again.

An outpouring of compassion and generosity swept in a vast wave from across the nation to embrace the victims. Churches swelled to overflowing and, for a moment, we stopped and paused to reevaluate. People prayed, and married, and conceived children, and did things they had put off, because time suddenly seemed precious. *Everything changed*, we said. And for a time it did. But only for a short time. Within a few months, the seared mind of the nation was no longer conscious of the jagged wound—except in New York, as people walked by Ground Zero. And as the war against terrorism with its daily carnage continues, most of us have sunk into our old ways again.

But what that experience made clear is that the American soul may have atrophied, but it is not dead. The American soul—which since our founding has cared for neighbors with generosity, respect, and compassion—has not been extinguished by modernity. America has always been a country with an extraordinary degree of compassion and good will. Anyone who has lived elsewhere in the world is struck by it when they come to these shores. And even as tattered as the social fabric of America has become in recent years, this remains true. But today, the pain in our own country does not tug at the heartstrings because we do not hear the people

in our own communities who suffer quietly. And yet, these victims of violence and neglect, both physical and emotional, are in every town. It's not a question of which neighborhood. They are all around us, among us.

The problem is that so many of the victims around us are almost invisible. The more than two million children who have a parent incarcerated aren't even a blip on the screen for most of us. We don't know their names, or where they go to school. Sometimes even their own teachers don't know of their plight, because the children are ashamed to admit that they have a parent behind bars. Yet these forgotten children are seven times more likely than their classmates to follow their parents into jail because of the kind of life they are thrust into, through no fault of their own.

The same invisibility blankets the working poor, the single mother who has left welfare only to discover that it's not possible to feed her children and pay for an apartment with one minimum wage job, and that she has to work two . . . while patching together care for her offspring. The mentally ill who wander the streets in the ranks of the homeless are virtually unemployable. Nobody wants to adopt HIV babies, and yet many are among us. The health needs of the uninsured fester quietly. This is the soft underbelly of an otherwise affluent nation.

The modern mindset points us toward the government to provide solutions. But as Ambassador Dan Coats has pointed out, there are some things the government can do and others it cannot. The most important question is not what should the government do, but what should we as individuals do? It is far easier to debate the first question. But where the rubber hits the road is where we put our own convictions into action in our own communities, with our own time and money. No new political policy edict can take the place of the soul of a nation. And that soul is very much in peril.

The problems of the nation's soul go far beyond the issue of material wealth or poverty. We live in a country of "down-and-outers" and "up-and-outers." We hear more about the "down-and-outers"—somebody who seeks solace in a needle or a rock of crack. Or the rebellious teenager who runs drugs or sells her body. The kid who finds a sense of family in a

gang that pummels him with steel-toed boots in an initiation rite. The single mom who goes to jail, leaving behind a six-year-old to take care of a toddler. Whole sections of cities where no one lives with a father. These are the bitter fruits of our contemporary culture for the “down-and-outers” of the inner city.

But let’s look at the “up-and-outers,” a more perplexing phenomenon. The driven business executive who sells his shares for an early retirement, only to discover the family he wanted to spend it with has imploded in his chronic absence. Or the male midlife crisis that roars full throttle into a hot sports car and a new woman. Or the teenager who gets a new Mercedes convertible for her sixteenth birthday and blows out her brains with her father’s handgun. These are the “up-and-outers”—people of means who have discovered that what they own or earn does not fill their hearts.

What do these two worlds have to do with each other? The answer to that question is one of the keys to renewal. We live in a culture that is relationally impoverished and spiritually crippled—for both the “up-and-outer” and the “down-and-outer.” What we all yearn for in the depth of our souls is relationship. There is a universal need that transcends the boundaries of race, geography, and income. One thing that heals a shattered life is the touch of another human being who is a vehicle of divine love. Relational one-to-one bridges can heal both the “up-and-outers” and the “down-and-outers.”

The maladies of our country do not all come from our material circumstances. They come from a poverty of spirit. Too few hands move swiftly enough to give where there is need. Street saints build relational bridges to heal the souls of the people whose lives they touch. The healing that takes place is reciprocal.

What is the scope of faith-based work in America? Sociologist Ram Cnaan has devoted the past ten years to finding out what religious congregations in America provide. The Israeli-born social scientist, a secular Jew, admits candidly, “I didn’t get into this field because of my religious beliefs. I moved into studying religion and social work . . . almost by mis-

take. My academic interest was in how society provides social services.”³ He was flummoxed to discover that America doesn’t provide these services through the government, as is usually the case in the European countries he had written about. In the European model, the government taxes and gives the money to local authorities, who provide services.

When he came to the United States, he asked people, “Who provides social services?” No one knew what to answer. So he said, “Six o’clock in the evening, you’ve been evicted from your home, you can’t eat, where would you go?” People would pause and say, “Well, to a homeless shelter, or I’d go to a soup kitchen.” He assumed these were government agencies. When he found out how many of them were run by religious congregations in the private sector, he was intrigued.

Cnaan has documented that there are approximately 350,000 different congregations in the United States.⁴ Religious congregations spend \$36 billion providing services in America today. Many such programs address the needs of children, the elderly, the poor, and the homeless, while others are involved in housing projects or neighborhood renewal, pastoral care, aid for the ill, or counseling. Some offer financial assistance, health care, or educational programs. Cnaan estimates the annual value of the work each congregation provides in helping others is on average \$184,000. He found that 93 percent of religious congregations provide at least one program of service for the community.⁵ And, most often, the beneficiaries were poor neighborhood children who had no affiliation with the church.

After a study of more than 14,000 congregations, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research concluded that “nearly 85 percent of US congregations are engaged in soup kitchens or food pantries, emergency shelters and clothing pantries, and with financial help to those in need.”⁶ Beyond these services offered directly by churches are a plethora of stand-alone nonprofits that churches have spun off, or which were founded as fully separate organizations.

Are faith-based organizations making a difference? A growing body of research indicates that some faith-based programs are making headway in treating social maladies that have resisted all other attempted cures. Some

faith-based prison programs are reducing the rate of recidivism of released convicts, ordinarily 50 percent or more, to as little as 8 percent.⁷ Mentoring programs for at-risk youth are improving academic performance and decreasing disciplinary infractions.⁸ Faith-based drug and alcohol treatment programs are releasing addicts from their life-crippling habit; one program has a success rate as high as 84 percent.⁹ Much more remains to be done to validate the results of such programs through serious sociological research on the “faith factor.” There are many wonderful stories, but, as the sociologist John DiIulio likes to remind us, the plural of anecdote is not data. However, as the sociological evidence continues to come in, it validates that faith is a force to be reckoned with.

This book will take you on a journey into the cities of America to experience the people, programs, and strategies of the street saints today. As the programs are introduced, their best practices are highlighted for those people who would like to emulate their successes. Where studies have been done, the research is summarized. An online directory at www.streetsaints.com provides contact information for all of the groups profiled.

Think of this journey like a filmmaker would, starting with close-up shots of individuals, gradually pulling back to a medium shot of groups of people, and finally, seeing a broad panorama of the landscape. In Part I, you will meet some of the street saints face-to-face in close-up portraits. They are diverse: a former gang banger, a Wall Street broker turned social entrepreneur, a third-grade dropout who has fathered a national movement, a heroin addict now freeing others from addiction, a nurse who has reclaimed an entire inner-city block from drug dealers, and a pastor who walks into gang confrontations to defuse them.

Pulling back the lens to a wider angle, in Part II we move from the people to the programs. The tour takes you behind the bars of prison to see: programs where street saints are transforming criminals so they won't return; mentors for the angry children prisoners leave behind; and an innovative way to protect the infants of convicted mothers. You will visit a

home that cares for abused toddlers and a partnership that mobilizes thousands of mentors for at-risk children, pairing one church with one school. You will see the genesis of a youth center that is transforming an entire neighborhood, as well as two successful models of inner-city schools raising the bar on education. You will see the transformation of homeless people and drug addicts into productive citizens.

Then the tour turns to social entrepreneurs finding creative ways to work, like combining the care of street kids with marketing coffee on the Internet. You will meet a priest who is transforming immigrants into entrepreneurs. We visit mentally and physically handicapped people supporting themselves with micro-enterprises. We go into several of the nation's most successful homeless shelters, which are transitioning residents into a new life. And we see drug treatment and welfare-to-work programs that have moved people out of dependency into self-sufficiency.

Part III pulls the camera lens back even further, to give a view of entire cities. Taking Nehemiah as the biblical paradigm for mobilizing people in renewal, you will meet two contemporary Nehemiah figures working today in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia. The tour continues through three American cities—Pittsburgh, Memphis, and Fresno—where strategies embrace a vision as big as the city and mobilize people of faith and resources to “transform geography into community.”¹⁰

Finally, Part IV shows us the big picture, the historical framework to put all of this activity into an even broader context, within which America has defined its soul since its founding. The concluding reflections point upward, providing a glimpse of the spiritual reasons people engage in this kind of work. There you will hear the voices of people like Henri Nouwen as the “wounded healer” and Mother Teresa, whose life as a street saint was a “pencil in the hand of God.”

My own journey into this world began in 1989 with a prayer. I had never really asked God what he wanted me to do with my life, and if you ever pray that prayer meaning it, look out. You may get something you are not expecting. The answer I got was one word: refugees. It was the sum-

mer before the Berlin Wall came down, and the first 300,000 people had fled Communism through snipped barbed wire on the border of Hungary, streaming into West Germany, where I lived. If they got out with a small suitcase, they were fortunate.¹¹

It was clear that not just someone should do something about them, but that I should. A friend and I launched a small initiative to care for those we could, with blankets, clothes, help finding a job or an apartment, and tutoring for their children. Over the coming months, we had opportunities to listen for hundreds of hours, to love these people through the transition, and to encourage others to do likewise. Neighbors came to my door, unasked, to press a check into my hands or to donate warm coats. My friend and I would drive to the shelters, having prayed and picked an address that morning from our list and having loaded a few things in the car. We would invariably discover the one family that had just arrived the night before, and we would have exactly what they needed in the car. If ever God was at work despite blind and fumbling human efforts, that was such a time.

I later experienced people of faith who were rebuilding in the ashes of the collapsed Soviet empire, and I marveled at their courage and the disproportionate effect they had on the wreckage around them. A small amount of money given to one honest Russian Orthodox priest would produce medicine for an entire wing of a children's hospital, and a visit a month later would reveal children demonstrating the first blush of returning health. A modest sum would allow a Russian street saint to feed scores of homeless people and rescue teenage girls from prostitution. The amounts of money friends asked me to deliver were not nearly as critical as finding the trustworthy people who were genuine agents of renewal.

My past eight years in America have taken me into homeless shelters, prisons, drug treatment centers, inner-city churches, and some neighborhoods that have caused my husband consternation. Through the Center for Renewal, I have worked with a number of these groups with enough intimacy to know, and sometimes to share, their bruises. What I have found through my encounters with nearly a thousand organizations and in

more than three hundred interviews is a remarkable diversity of people who amaze me. They are genuine agents of renewal, modest saints at work. Their humility, contagious joy, and invincible spirit keep drawing me back, particularly when I am spiritually hungry. I know that where they are working, there is always evidence that the aroma of Christ is present.

Come and meet some of them.

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