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Understanding Faith-Based Organizations and Religious Giving in the United States

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The Think Series showcases the creative and scholarly work of the UVA Humanitarian Collaborative's Summer Research Cohort. Each student explored a pressing issue in the humanitarian field and developed a final product that reflects their unique perspective, highlighting the diverse ways students are engaging with global challenges and imagining new solutions. The views expressed in these projects are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Humanitarian Collaborative.

This piece provides an overview of how faith-based organizations were affected by federal funding cuts, how donors responded, and religious affiliation affects donor likelihood. The Appendix provides a list of major humanitarian FBOs.

Introduction

In 2025, a sharp reduction in USAID funding—prompted by executive policy changes—significantly impacted faith-based humanitarian organizations (FBOs), especially large Catholic and Protestant groups that rely heavily on federal contracts. While some smaller and ideologically distinct groups have reported an uptick in private donations, this increase has not offset the loss of federal dollars overall. Key trends indicate both an emerging resilience and a deepening divide within the FBO sector.

- Large, government-funded FBOs like Catholic Relief Services, World Vision, and Global Refuge are experiencing layoffs, program cuts, and deep budget shortfalls.
- Privately funded evangelical groups—notably Samaritan's Purse and those supported by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)—are seeing a surge in donations and global outreach.
- Philanthropic giving to FBOs has increased, but early data suggest it is largely restricted to ideologically aligned groups and wealthy denominations.

Key Trends and Developments

1. Many FBOs have been dependent on USAID funding and are dealing with the fallout of drastic cuts.

- Catholic Relief Services (CRS) lost up to 50 percent of programmatic funding after the USAID freeze, leading to layoffs and staff furloughs (Callahan, 2025).
- World Vision, another major FBO, received 44 percent of its \$1.5B revenue from government contracts in 2022. Its leadership anticipates serious operational disruption (Dias, 2025).
- Global Refuge, formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, relied on federal funds for 95 percent of its revenue in 2023. It has laid off or furloughed over a quarter of its staff (Dias, 2025).

2. Private donors have stepped up—but not enough to cover the gaps.

- World Relief raised \$3 million in private donations shortly after the USAID freeze, but it still anticipates an \$8 million budget shortfall (Luscombe, 2025).
- Samaritan's Purse, by contrast, received less than 5 percent of its \$1B+ annual revenue from government sources and has remained financially stable.
- The LDS Church recently announced \$634 million in global relief spending for 2024 alone—most of it from member donations (Stack, 2025).

3. Religious affiliation is a consistent predictor of higher and more frequent charitable donations, but FBOs vary in the extent they can mobilize their supporters.

- According to *Philanthropy Roundtable* (Zinsmeister, 2019),
 - 65 percent of weekly churchgoers in the U.S. donate to charity, compared to 41 percent of non-attenders.
 - On average, Americans with religious affiliation give more than twice as much annually as those with no affiliation: \$1,590 vs. \$695.
 - Those attending worship services twice monthly donate over 4x more (\$2,935 vs. \$704) than non-attenders.
 - Importantly, two-thirds of religious donors also give to secular causes, with average donations 20 percent higher than those from nonreligious peers.
 - 73 percent of all U.S. charitable giving flows to religious organizations or faith-based causes.
- Groups like Samaritan's Purse benefit from strong alignment with their donor base's values and conservative evangelical identity, fueling robust private giving.

- CRS and World Vision, while large and historically bipartisan, may struggle to attract the same ideological loyalty—and thus, sustained private giving.
- Religious intensity, media presence, and pulpit engagement are powerful variables in faith-based fundraising.

Looking Ahead

As church giving patterns follow annual cycles—especially around year-end holidays—the full financial impact of USAID’s cuts may not be visible until late 2025. Key questions for future research include:

- Will private donors permanently replace lost public funding for humanitarian work?
- Are faith leaders being mobilized from the pulpit to galvanize new giving?
Can smaller, locally embedded FBOs scale effectively without government support?

Appendix I: Major Faith-Based Humanitarian Organizations

World Vision International

Religious affiliation: Christianity – no denominational affiliation

*Income*¹: 1.51 billion (World Vision, 2023)

Reach: 34,000 staff in nearly 100 countries, 35.8 million people reached in disaster response (World Vision, n.d.)

Guiding Principles: Promotion of justice, servanthood, ‘witness to christ’, relationships with local churches. Target affected children regardless of their faith background.

Catholic Relief Services

Religious affiliation: Christianity – Catholicism

Income: 1.46 billion (Catholic Relief Services, 2023)

Reach: 32 million people in emergency and recovery program participants across 68 countries (ibid)

Guiding Principles: Pro-life organization, ‘human flourishing’/ dignity, ‘culture of encounter’ (ibid).

Samaritan's Purse

Religious affiliation: Christianity – nondenominational evangelical

Income: 1.2 billion (Samaritan’s Purse, 2023)

Reach: Specifics unknown

Guiding Principles: Based on the story of the Good Samaritan. Aims to evangelize, salvation, monogamy/heterosexual marriage, complementarianism (Samaritan’s Purse, 2023).

American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

Religious affiliation: Jewish

Income: 410 million (ProPublica, 2023b)

Reach: 69 countries

Guiding Principles: Focus on providing aid to Jewish communities (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, n.d.).

Islamic Relief Worldwide

Religious affiliation: Islamic – no branch affiliation

Income: 313.6 million (Islamic Relief, 2021)

¹ Incomes represent reported income for 2023 US 990 taxes where relevant, and self reported audited income for 2023 for non-US headquartered organizations.

Reach: 16.8 million people

Guiding Principles: Zakat (charity) and Qurbani (sacrifice) as primary framing for donors, ihsan (excellence) and amanah (custodianship), addressing poverty (Islamic Relief, n.d.).

Lutheran World Federation

Religious affiliation: Christian – Lutheran

Income: 194 million (Lutheran World Federation, 2023)

Reach: 24 countries, serving 3.47 million people, run through local partner churches (ibid)

Guiding Principles: service, dignity, justice, compassion (ibid)

Helping Hand for Relief and Development

Religious affiliation: Islamic – no branch affiliation

Income: 94 million (ProPublica, n.d.-a)

Reach: 1.4mill beneficiaries of emergency relief and disaster management programs (HHRD, 2023)

Guiding Principles: Mutual Respect and Care for All, Equity, Justice, Honesty, and Transparency, Self-Respect and Solidarity with the Poor (ibid)

Tzu Chi

Religious affiliation: Buddhist – Taiwan

Income: 35.3 million (ProPublica, 2023c).

Reach: Specifics unknown

Guiding Principles: respecting life, volunteerism, living in harmony with the earth, nurturing transformations within, compassion (Tzu Chi, n.d.)

Muslim Aid

Religious affiliation: Islamic – no branch affiliation

Income: 26.2 million

Reach: 1.7 million people supported through emergency programming (Muslim Aid, 2023)

Guiding Principles: Dignity (*Karamah*), Justice (*Adl*), Excellence (*Ihsan*), Compassion (*Rahma*), Service (*Khidma*) (Muslim Aid, 2023)

Sewa

Religious affiliation: Hindu

Income: 7.59 mill (ProPublica, 2023d)

Reach: 100,000+ (Sewa International, 2023)

Guiding Principles: Dharmic principles of “Serving Humanity is Serving Divinity” and “Unity in Diversity.” *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (humanity as one family) (ibid).

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