

CONSERVATISM AND THE QUEST FOR COMMUNITY

Remarks by William Schambra

as a part of
The Bradley Lecture Series of the American Enterprise Institute
Washington, DC

December 8, 2009

According to sociologist and AEI scholar Robert Nisbet, twentieth-century American liberalism elevated the centralized national state as the source of community-mindedness for Americans, at the same time undermining the roles traditionally played by family, neighborhood, voluntary association, and other traditional groups. How can conservatism respond to this challenge and begin to revitalize some of the more traditional sources of community in America? In response to this question, William Schambra, Hudson Institute senior fellow and director of Hudson's Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal, delivered the following remarks as a part of the Bradley Lecture Series at the American Enterprise Institute.

THE TOPIC tonight—conservatism and the quest for community—summons immediately to mind any number of revered names from the pantheon of conservative intellectuals who would be sources of great enlightenment for us: Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Russell Kirk, and of course, Robert Nisbet, whose book *The Quest for Community* supplied the title for this lecture.

But I want to anchor my reflections in the life of a very different kind of individual, who lived and worked far from the quiet halls of scholarship, in the grim and dangerous backstreets of San Antonio, Texas.

Freddie Garcia—Pastor Freddie, as he was known—was a heroin addict who was liberated from his addiction, so he testified, through transformation by the Holy Spirit.

He went on to found Victory Fellowship, which would spawn scores of community ministries for the addicted, homeless, and lost across the United States and Latin America.

Tens of thousands of copies of the autobiography he wrote with his wife Ninfa, *Outcry in the Barrio*, have been distributed in churches and prisons and on street corners around the world.

I've seen his pastors at a philanthropy conference handing out copies of the book to the janitors folding up the chairs, rather than lobbying the foundation CEOs to whom they had just spoken.

At the time of Pastor Freddie’s passing a little over a month ago, his ministry had just completed a \$3.6 million center for the application of faith to the problems of alcoholism and drug abuse.¹

I had the privilege of getting to know Pastor Freddie through Bob Woodson, my teacher in all matters we’ll discuss tonight. Most conservatives will not have heard Freddie Garcia’s name. And yet in his life and ministry he embodied conservative social policy at its best.

His work did not rely on—indeed, it repudiated—massive government expenditures for the purchase of costly professional expertise.

Rather, in the best tradition of Alexis de Toqueville’s science of association—of decentralized, voluntary community-building—he worked to construct small, tightly-knit, nurturing faith communities for those whose addictions and incarcerations had long since driven them from the arms of family and friends.

Pastor Freddie’s youthful experiences seemed to destine him for a very different political orientation. As a young man, he tells us, he was stung by Anglo society’s racial prejudice.

He joined the Austin Street Gang because they, like him, were “proud of [their] Mexican heritage, not ashamed of [their] language and culture.” He became a fierce champion of what would later be described as “Chicano Power,” a posture that *should* have made him a prime recruit for liberalism.

Furthermore, as an aggrieved Mexican-American *who had fallen into drug addiction*, he was a perfect candidate for liberalism’s approach to social dysfunction.

That approach regards problems like addiction to be, not personal afflictions—to suggest as much is to “blame the victim”—but rather the product of larger social forces like racism and poverty.

At the heart of the 20th century American progressive project was the conviction that such forces could at last be understood and mastered by new sciences of society like psychology and sociology.

It would no longer be necessary simply to “put band-aids” on problems, as did old and discredited charity. Now, through the systematic, rational, scientific approach, it would be possible to get to the root causes of problems and solve them once and for all.

But this meant dismantling Tocqueville’s world of local, voluntary, faith-based agencies, given their distinctly unsystematic, irrational, unscientific character.

¹ For more information, see “Victory Outreach minister Garcia dies” by Guillermo X. Garcia and J. Michael Parker, *San Antonio Express-News*, October 17, 2009, online at http://www.mysanantonio.com/obituaries/Freddie_Garcia_71_helped_addicts_kick_their_drug_habits.html (last accessed December 9, 2009).

The professional expert, trained in social science, would displace the local charitable and religious leader. A streamlined, centralized, unified, bureaucratic service delivery system would displace the hodgepodge of partial and parochial local voluntary programs.

As for the sense of community, belonging, and purpose that had once been supplied at the local level by Tocqueville's townships and voluntary associations, that too would now be centralized and nationalized.

The federal government, and above all the American presidency, would summon Americans out of their self-interested, parochial concerns, demanding instead that they commit their lives to the service of a larger national ideal, a noble, comprehensive national oneness.

As Herbert Croly put it in his century-old classic *The Promise of American Life*: now there would be a "subordination of the individual to the demand of a dominant and constructive national purpose."

A citizen would begin to "think first of the State and next of himself," and "individuals of all kinds will find their most edifying individual opportunities in serving their country."

Indeed, a great, American *national* community would emerge, vastly superior to the cacophony of petty *local* communities hitherto created by local churches and voluntary associations.

This national community would be bound together, in Croly's words, by a "religion of human brotherhood," which "can be realized only through the loving-kindness which individuals feel . . . particularly toward their fellow-countrymen."

As if taking direct aim at the Pastor Freddies of the world, progressive sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross summed it up this way: America needed to transcend its fragmentation into "thousands of local groups sewed up in separatist dogmas and dead to most of the feelings which thrill the rest of society."

This would be accomplished by the "widest possible diffusion of secular knowledge" among the many, which "narrows the power of the fanatic or the false prophet to gain a following."

Meanwhile, university training for the elite would "[rear] up a type of leader who will draw men together with unifying thoughts, instead of dividing them, as does the sect-founder, with his private imaginings and personal notions."

Now, Freddie Garcia may never have studied Croly, Ross, or American progressivism. But he was nonetheless an expert on their teachings, because they had been put into practice directly in his life.

Desperate to conquer his addiction, he signed himself in to what was then called the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital for Narcotic Addicts in Fort Worth, Texas. For six months, as he put it, "he took every therapy they offered, determined not to leave 'til [he] was cured."

Before he had even returned home after discharge, he had sought out a pusher and gotten high again.

Freddie tackled his addiction once again, though, by entering a local chapter of Teen Challenge, the national drug addiction program founded by David Wilkerson, author of *The Cross and the Switchblade*.

There he was told that if he asked Jesus to forgive him for his sins, he would “be a drug addict no more, because Jesus wants to change your life right now.”

But Freddie was reluctant to abandon liberalism’s social science. As he put it, “I argued with myself, I’ve tried the best hospitals, psychiatrists, psychologists, and group therapists. How can Jesus, whom I can’t see, feel, or touch, change me?”

Yet prayer did change him, Freddie testifies. He shed not only his heroin addiction, but his animus against Anglos as well.

After his faith had “taken away the hatred that embittered [his] life all those years,” he felt “free to love my Mexican heritage without being disloyal to America,” and “free to love America without rejecting my Mexican heritage.”

Summing up the changes that faith had made in the lives of those touched by Victory Fellowship, Pastor Freddie put it this way: “The miracle in our lives didn’t happen when we called upon the name of Socrates, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, or Sigmund Freud. This transformation took place in our lives when we called upon the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Naturally, the social service establishment is not amused by such challenges to its hegemony.

After all, groups like Teen Challenge and Victory Fellowship—small, intense, faith communities, healing addictions through prayer rather than therapy, through love and mutual obligation, rather than dispassionate science—are precisely what Tocqueville had observed and admired in America, and precisely what liberalism’s service state had vowed to extinguish.

So it is no surprise that in 1995 the Texas Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse came after Teen Challenge of South Texas, threatening to put it out of business because its counselors lacked formal professional credentials.

It took a demonstration in front of the Alamo organized by Freddie Garcia and Bob Woodson, plus an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* by Marvin Olasky, to turn back this attack.

Pastor Freddie, then, was a living testament to the truth of Tocqueville and the failure of social science liberalism, a leader of deep faith and traditional social values, who had learned to overcome the wounds of racism in order to become an American patriot.

So why was he not routinely sought out by conservative policy makers during his lifetime for advice, counsel, and support?

Unhappily, Pastor Freddie's beliefs do not make a good fit with either of the two historic strands of conservative social thought, namely, traditionalism and libertarianism.

Pastor Freddie was a man of faith, to be sure, but it wasn't the sort of faith with which most traditionalists are comfortable. For those of the Russell Kirk persuasion, religion tends to be a sober, staid, institutional affair.

Its value to society is not so much personal salvation as social stability. That is, religion insures allegiance to permanent truths and established, quasi-aristocratic forms, thereby shoring up society against radical innovation and democratic excess.

Robert Nisbet described the traditionalist posture toward faith this way: "Religion . . . was preeminently public and institutional, something to which loyalty and a decent regard for form were owing, a valuable pillar to both state and society, but not a profound and permeating doctrine, least of all a total experience."

This would have been a bit lukewarm for Pastor Freddie. Though the church he founded is non-denominational, it could best be described as Pentecostal, and so is very much a "total experience."

His autobiography brims with ecstatic gatherings of recovering addicts speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing through the laying on of hands.

This is nothing unusual for America. After all, several "great awakenings" filled our frontier forests with boisterous camp meetings featuring, as one historian noted, "falling to the ground, jerking, barking, and dancing."

More than a few of today's gleaming, sophisticated nonprofits have such sweaty, smoky camp meetings in their not-too-distant past.

But this exuberant, populist evangelism *is* a far cry indeed from traditionalism's iconic Anglican vicar, chatting amiably with his aristocratic patron, patiently counseling his dwindling congregation in its dank, crumbling chapel to keep a stiff upper lip. (I can say that because I'm Episcopalian.)

Pastor Freddie's passionate, communal faith presents an even more serious challenge for libertarian conservatives. After all, when Robert Nisbet reminded Americans of the importance of local community several decades ago, libertarian Frank Meyer described it as a "vicious" attempt to impose on Americans the "subtler, quieter tyranny" of small community life.

To such a libertarian, Pastor Freddie's ministry could only appear to be highly irrational and oppressively cult-like. In the tightly knit community of believers demanded by the battle to

overcome addiction, there is little room for libertarianism's proud and fiercely independent individual.

Yet, if only for the sake of sheer political survival, conservatism *must* find a way to welcome the likes of Freddie Garcia into its camp. Otherwise, liberalism's boast that demographic trends are on its side will soon be validated.

Liberalism is counting on ever growing numbers of Hispanic voters to join its ranks, adding them to African-Americans, wealthy professionals, and other groups to insure, as John Judis and Ruy Teixeira argue, an emerging Democratic majority. Unless conservatism can make inroads *somewhere* among these groups, its future is dim.

But we also know that, *especially* among Hispanics and African Americans, robust expressions of faith like Pentecostalism are spreading—to use the entirely apt cliché—like wildfire.

Starting with a handful of worshippers at the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles just over a century ago, Pentecostalism today counts as many as 500 million adherents around the world.

A Pew Research Center study from 2006 found that renewalism—understood as Pentecostalism plus associated Charismatic movements within established churches—commands the allegiance of some 23% of the American population.

If there is a single great uncertainty in liberalism's sunny calculations for its demographic future, it's the faith factor. For surveys tell us that renewalists are far more likely than secular and other religious voters to entertain conservative political and social values.

As Pastor Freddie's experience made clear, there is a vast gulf between the world views of renewalism's faith communities and progressivism's social service professionals.

However great that tension, though, if neither of the two great schools of conservative thought—traditionalism or libertarianism—are able to accommodate the likes of Pastor Freddie, how can conservatism make him welcome?

Actually, we've struggled with this problem before, indeed in this very building and at this very think tank, the American Enterprise Institute. Three decades ago, in the wake of Watergate and the defeat of President Ford by Jimmy Carter, conservatives found themselves, as is the case today, in political eclipse.

But they were watching with considerable hope certain tensions developing among what had been, since the New Deal, solid liberal Democratic constituencies.

Throughout the 60s and early 70s, a great rift had opened within liberalism, pitting the centralized social service state constructed by the Great Society against neighborhoods, local communities, and ethnic groups whose ways of life had been targeted by the state's social engineering schemes.

In his best Crolyan language, Lyndon Johnson gamely summoned Americans to a broader sense of national community. As he put it, “I see a day ahead with a united nation, divided neither by class nor by section nor by color, knowing no South or North, no East or West, but just one great America, free of malice and free of hate, and loving thy neighbor as thyself.”

But Americans had begun to see that the effort to build a utopian *national* community meant the destruction of their own tangible and immediate *neighborhood* communities.

Whether the issue was crime, pornography, housing, abortion, prayer in school, textbooks, or busing, local customs and mores were being overturned by federal edict in the name of a single national standard.

As a result, groups that had been the bedrock of the New Deal coalition—Southern evangelicals and ethnic, Catholic blue collar workers—erupted into populist revolt, and suddenly came into political play.

As with Pentecostals today, though, these groups too fit only poorly with the established conservative intellectual schools. Blue-collar ethnics did not share traditionalist yearnings for the bygone days of status, class, and hierarchy, which had consigned their ancestors to the bottommost ranks.

Nor were these often unionized workers particularly moved by libertarian paeans to the free market, which had always seemed to serve only the interests of the plutocratic owning class.

Bill Gavin, writing in the 70s as a proud Irish Catholic and a self-described “street-corner” conservative, put it this way: “There is something in the conservative intellectual movement that loves a wall, a wall that keeps the uncleansed, the unshriven, and unwanted from staining the pure, unsullied dogmas handed down to conservative intellectual chieftains from the days of old.”

Under the leadership of Bill Baroody Sr. and Jr., AEI in the mid-70s tackled this problem head-on. As Michael Baroody recently reminded me, his family’s ethnic Lebanese, artisan background, plus an intense devotion to the Greek Catholic Melkite Rite, often left them as well on the wrong side of conservatism’s intellectual wall.

And so they gathered on several floors in this building, to be sure, a stellar group of scholars associated with the traditionalist and libertarian conservative schools of thought.

But they also brought under the AEI wing some writers and practitioners who would by no stretch of the imagination fit into either category, because they reflected rather the populist, ethnic rejection of progressive social engineering.

There was, for instance, Michael Novak, who had been a speechwriter in the 1972 McGovern presidential campaign, and author of *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, published just a few years before he came to AEI.

In that volume, Novak repudiated progressive liberalism's effort to eradicate particularist ethnic allegiances on behalf of one vast homogenized, rationalized national community.

But the alternative for him was not traditional conservatism's social hierarchy, which had never treated his Slavic ancestors well. Nor was it the unfettered free market, which had killed and maimed too many of his ethnic kindred in molten steel spills and methane-filled coal shafts.

Rather, he called for a public policy that "[turned] toward the organic networks of communal life . . . family, ethnic groups, and voluntary associations in primary groups."

Similarly, Bob Woodson—who had been recruited directly from the Urban League—rejected the professionalized therapeutic state's approach to working with youth gangs. But he also rejected conservatism's preference for throw-away-the-key law enforcement.

Rather, in his AEI volume *A Summons to Life*, he held up the model of Sister Fallakah Fatah and her House of Umoja in Philadelphia. Like Pastor Freddie, she had created a small, intense community to keep neighborhood teens out of the gang life, reflecting the example of the extended African family—not the typical conservative point of reference.

Lest it be unclear how non-traditional the Woodson approach was, his conferences brought to the halls of AEI dozens of urban policy "experts" with names like Robert "Fat Rob" Allen and Albert "Crazy Cat" Mejias.

Novak and Woodson both proposed as an alternative to the progressive state—as well as to libertarianism and traditionalism—a return to what became known at AEI as "mediating structures."

These were precisely the small, immediate, voluntary Tocquevillian social structures whose parochialism and localism had been such an object of scorn by progressivism.

Sociologist Peter Berger and theologian Richard John Neuhaus were soon gathering this work under AEI's "mediating structures" project.

(They too were anything but traditional conservatives or libertarians. Their previous collaboration, entitled *Movement and Revolution*, had called for radical transformation in American public policy, with the authors disagreeing only over whether or not this would require an outright revolution.)

But in their monograph *To Empower People*, published in 1977, Berger and Neuhaus brought the strands of populist, ethnic, localist rebellion against the central government into a coherent program for policymakers.

Social services delivered through locally rooted, authoritative institutions like family, neighborhood, church, and voluntary association would have a great deal more legitimacy and success, they argued, than those that came from distant, alienating bureaucracies.

The “mediating structures” approach, in turn, reflected the early work of a prominent sociologist who joined AEI in the late 70s, namely Robert Nisbet.

Nisbet argued, especially in *The Quest for Community*, that family, neighborhood, and local community were important not only for the humane delivery of services, but also for providing the otherwise isolated individual a sense of belonging or community.

As he put it, “The quest for community will not be denied, for it springs from some of the powerful needs of human nature—needs for a clear sense of cultural purpose, membership, status, and continuity.”

If not met by mediating structures, he maintained, these needs would be met instead by the state itself through the notion of an all-encompassing national community—an insight that brought sudden clarity to the project of American progressivism.

Even the neo-conservative intellectuals who had begun to gather at AEI around the late Irving Kristol—themselves ill at ease with traditionalism and libertarianism—resonated to the notion of mediating structures.

Their growing skepticism about federal social policy was fuelled in part by the damage it had inflicted on the urban neighborhoods that had been *their* youthful source of community.

As Nathan Glazer pointed out, when called into the cities to deal with the “breakdown of traditional ways of dealing with distress,” social policy only “encouraged their further weakening” by displacing them with professional service providers, in the end actually making problems *worse*.

AEI’s mediating structures concept helped conservatism think about public policy in a new way. It not only suggested practical solutions to problems, like vouchers for education and child care, neighborhood crime watches, and home-like settings for rehabilitation of the addicted.

It did so in a way that tapped into the populist yearning for the preservation or restoration of community-mindedness within families and neighborhoods.

It thereby appealed to typically non-conservative voters, and became an important element in the elections of presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush.

The notion of mediating structures was explicitly echoed in Reagan’s “Private Sector Initiatives Task Force” and “New Federalism,” Bush 41’s “Points of Light” Initiative, and especially in Bush 43’s Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives.

Indeed, George W. Bush’s faith-based initiative made an effort to reach out to local grassroots leaders precisely like Pastor Freddie. For when Pastor Freddie took on the Texas social service bureaucracy in 1995, the new governor at the time was none other than George W. Bush.

After the demonstration at the Alamo, Governor Bush called Bob Woodson into his office in Austin to learn more about this notion of mediating structures. He also named Freddie Garcia to a faith-based task force, to explore ways social services could be provided through grassroots groups.

When he ran for the presidency in 2000, Bush's advisers were *steeped* in the doctrine of mediating structures, especially speechwriter Michael Gerson and domestic policy chief Mayor Steve Goldsmith of Indianapolis, who had used it to frame his own work with his city's grassroots groups.

It is surely no accident that in his two presidential races, Governor Bush received, for a Republican, quite impressive levels of support from Hispanic and African American voters.

But what about the future of the mediating structures concept? Are Americans still looking for ways to satisfy a yearning for community?

I would suggest that the presidency of Barack Obama proves that they are. The election of 2008 reminds us that Americans will seek community in its centralized, collectivist form if, as Mr. Nisbet warned us, it is unavailable elsewhere.

Well before candidate Obama made clear his determination to launch a major new expansion of the social service state, he laid the groundwork for it in the manner of all progressive presidents of the past.

He repeatedly and eloquently summoned us to transcend our petty, parochial differences in order to come together as one great national community. Like Herbert Croly, he urged us to reject the pursuit of narrow self-interest, and commit ourselves instead to national service in the name of a transcendent public good.

As he put it on Potomac Primary Night, "We have to put an end to the division and distraction in Washington, so that we unite this nation around a common purpose, a higher purpose. . . This is our calling in this campaign. To reaffirm that fundamental belief—I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper—that makes us one people, and one nation."

To be sure, this president is much savvier about the importance of mediating structures, given his background as a community organizer.

Arguing that he still believes "it's a good idea to have a partnership between the White House and grassroots groups, both faith-based and secular," Obama announced early on that among the few Bush programs he intended to preserve was precisely the faith-based initiative. And it's striking that he immediately placed it into the hands of a young *Pentecostal* preacher.

Even so, it can be anticipated that the relentless secularization and rationalization of the social service state—now once again unleashed by a friendly President—will sooner or later collide head-on with the prerogatives of mediating structures, just as they had in the 60s and 70s.

It is almost inconceivable that serious tremors will not soon be detected along the fault line that runs deep within the Democratic Party, separating a passionately religious populism from an equally *dispassionate* professional elitism, each now with major claims upon a revived service delivery state.

In preparation for this moment, we must consider again the lessons of AEI's mediating structures project, and what it taught us about renewal through building a more inclusive conservatism.

To be sure, the world of conservative think tanks, funders, and publications is considerably larger than it was during the Baroody era at AEI. This is a welcome development.

But it may tempt us to believe that conservatism can renew itself entirely *from within*, simply by putting extra shifts on the production line of established conservative thought.

Yet conservatism cannot begin to address its demographic problem by generating ever more elaborate and detailed policy analyses or writing ever more prominently placed op-eds in their defense.

A full conservative recovery rather will have to recruit and promote the modern-day equivalents of Novak and Woodson—those who speak, often in a boisterous, populist language, for constituencies that are leaving liberalism, but have not yet arrived at conservatism.

Just as in the 70s, it will be necessary to tap into the populist energies triggered by the aggressions of an expanding social service state by seeking out and supporting the voices of dissent, even though those voices may speak in tones not readily identifiable as conservative.

This will mean incorporating more vigorous discussion and dissent within conservatism. That may not be entirely welcomed by foundations and think tanks increasingly managed according to the latest business techniques for insuring smoothly-humming, efficient output of product.

But as before, this is the way tomorrow's enlarged conservatism will be constructed, with new and authentic voices of populist insurgency helping to give it shape and being shaped by it in turn.

Ronald Reagan, after all, brought into conservatism a populist impulse which made it a movement that may not have met the standards of Russell Kirk or Friedrich Hayek. So a future conservatism must be shaped by liberalism's populist critics in ways that we cannot now fully anticipate but which we should welcome.

Beyond the recruitment of dissident intellectuals, I would suggest that it's incumbent upon every conservative think tank, foundation, and public official to seek out, support, and become fully and directly acquainted with the Freddie Garcias in their own immediate backyard.

For too long, conservatives have argued that our problems can best be solved by civil society, but then they've walked away—as if such high expectations for the performance of civil society didn't impose *particular* obligations on those who raised them in the first place.

Conservatives have too readily argued for civic renewal *in the abstract*, without making an effort to find out what civic renewal looks like *in the flesh*.

Arthur Brooks has pointed out that conservatives tend to be more generous in their charitable giving than liberals. But without a practical and immediate acquaintance with civic groups based on the Woodson model, conservative generosity will flow to nonprofits that are nothing like Freddie Garcia's Victory Fellowship.

Indeed, conservative donors too often give by default to the largest and most popular charities today—those that are most professional and adept at fundraising.

Yet they are frequently nothing more than mini-replicas of government programs, providing expensive social services manned by well-paid credentialed professionals.

They're also the most vigorous proponents of the view that only government can provide the massive funding needed for such services, and that conservatism's faith in private charity is a cruel hoax.

In other words, wealthy conservatives often cancel out their *political* contributions with their *charitable* contributions.

Every conservative who utters the phrase, "that's a job for civil society," should be able to name and demonstrate immediate acquaintance with at least a dozen actual examples of civil society *doing* the job, in the form of grassroots groups personally visited and funded.

Though many will be faith-based groups, as Bob Woodson points out, it's not necessary to fund the ritual, just the results. But the results may be presented in unfamiliar ways. Rather than elaborate evaluation studies and power point presentations, you will hear story and testimony—rather like this lecture this evening.

The Bradley Foundation, which supports this lecture series and the scholarship of many in this room tonight, works equally hard at giving grants of five and ten thousand dollars to groups in Milwaukee's inner city, which Bob Woodson helped it find.

Having been involved in that grantmaking, I can attest to the truth of Mr. Woodson's argument that there are dozens of Freddie Garcias laboring quietly but effectively in *every* American community, just waiting to be discovered.

Conservative donors and policy makers need to spend more time with civil society in the flesh not only to make wiser *donations*, but also to make wiser *policy*.

They should formulate the next round of mediating structures proposals by seeking out and tapping the wisdom of inner city grassroots leaders. As Pastor Freddie's life demonstrated, no one can tell us more than they about the manifest failures of the progressive social service state, because they have seen and experienced them first hand.

They can also tell us precisely what changes—often amounting to minor, low-cost adjustments—could be made in existing laws and regulations to simplify life for those who are truly solving social problems.

Unlike large, bureaucratic nonprofits, about the *last* thing grassroots groups are likely to suggest is a new, complex, expensive, government-run social program. They already know how that story turns out.

By now, the question must occur to some, how will all this attention to grassroots community groups help conservatism speak to the rest of America, the non-urban, the non-poor, the non-minority? Would renewed interest in mediating structures resonate there as well?

First, it should be noted that even the wealthiest suburban voters form their opinion about conservatism based to some degree on its attitude toward the poor and marginalized.

If conservatism's only idea of a civil rights program is opposition to affirmative action, if its only idea of a poverty program is opposition to welfare spending, then inevitably Americans will conclude that conservatives simply don't care about the poor.

From there, it's an easy step to the argument that conservatives care only about the rich. And if one critique of conservatism has proven to be particularly damaging since the New Deal, it's the proposition that conservatism is completely and exclusively identified with the interests of the wealthy.

The embrace of grassroots civil society is one way to dispel this notion, and to prove that conservative convictions are not only for the hard of heart.

But beyond that, the desire to reconstitute civil society—and hence the utility of mediating structures—are by no means confined to the inner city.

In his volume *The Great Disruption*, Frank Fukuyama brings powerful evidence to bear substantiating Robert Nisbet's view that the quest for community will not be denied because it is rooted *in human nature itself*.

Modern evolutionary biology, he notes, suggests that we are naturally led to reconstitute social order on a small and immediate scale, no matter the magnitude of otherwise disruptive social or economic forces.

Indeed, as he puts it, “the study of how order arises, not as a result of a top-down mandate by hierarchical authority . . . but as a result of self-organization on the part of decentralized individuals, is one of the most interesting and important intellectual developments of our time.”

The drive to reestablish and institutionalize face-to-face community is perhaps most energetically displayed in the growth of evangelical megachurches in suburbs across the

country—a manifestation of the same impulse that is fueling the growth of Pentecostalism in the inner city.

Although the most striking symbol of this growth may be the soaring, multi-thousand seat cathedral, the fact is that the first thing the megachurches do is to break down their thousands into the smallest of groups bonded by strong mutual interests.

As a reporter from *Mother Jones* put it, “By taking on roles as various as those of the neighborhood welcome committee, the Rotary, the corner diner, the country club mixer, the support group—and, of course, family and school—megachurches have become the tightly knit villages that many Americans think they grew up in.”

The effort to reconstitute local community has economic manifestations as well. For all we hear about the new, post-industrial globalized marketplace, its *particular* reliance on entrepreneurial creativity may put a premium on the restoration of more intense and immediate human ties.

As Fukuyama suggests, “It would appear that the impersonal sharing of data over electronic networks is not enough to create the kind of mutual trust and respect evident in places like Silicon Valley; for that, face-to-face contact and reciprocal engagement that comes about as a result of repeated social interaction is necessary.”

The mediating structures framework even holds lessons for American foreign policy. In the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, success has not been achieved solely by the top-down application of professional expertise in the form of superior American military technology.

What has been needed as well is the cultivation and recruitment of local tribes and ethnic groups to defend their own local communities against an oppressive Islamist theocracy—a truth we recall from Bob Woodson’s work with inner city gangs.

Conservatism, then, must learn to address the yearning for community not only for the sake of the inner city poor, but also to meet a wide range of spiritual, economic, and even foreign policy goals of relevance to all Americans.

As we do so, we would do well to seek advice not only from the well-known theorists of community that come immediately to the conservative mind, but also from the Pastor Freddie’s of the world.

For they have managed to reconstruct civil society under the most difficult and demanding circumstances imaginable, battling not only the *problems* they were established to address, but at the same time costly and intrusive social service *programs* that often only make the problems *worse*.

There is a final reason to seek out the Freddie Garcias of the world, and it speaks directly to conservatives of faith.

For many years, it was an indisputable tenet of social science that the march of progressive rationalism would inexorably secularize the modern world.

Conservatives all too often seemed to buy into that notion as well. Describing the “Sea of Faith,” Matthew Arnold could only lament: “But now I only hear/Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.”

As important as faith and its forms were to the stability and order of society, the best we could hope to do, apparently, was to husband and protect this dwindling resource. There certainly seemed to be no way to replenish its supply.

Freddie Garcia and his fellow renewalists have proven, to the contrary, that modernity need *not* mean the end of faith. Indeed, its looseness and uncertainty drove millions into the arms of many robust faiths, which accommodated modernity while taming its most vertiginous features.

Faith, and along with it civil society, have been able to tap into new and unanticipated springs of energy and growth. They have validated Tocqueville’s estimate that we Americans possess a way to reconstruct community among ourselves, no matter how unpromisingly alien we initially are to one another.

The dynamic of faith, civil society, and community, then, is perhaps not steady decline, but rather death and resurrection.

And it is precisely this dynamic that is dramatically on display in Pastor Freddie’s Victory Chapel.

Seeing a church packed with former prisoners and addicts—vividly scarred by their experiences and covered with tattoos, once members of gangs locked in deadly street and cellblock warfare—belting out hymns of praise for their now straight and sober lives, it is tempting to believe that the hand of God, the fire of the Spirit, have indeed moved through this room.

It is tempting to believe that death can indeed be followed by resurrection. No more potent a boost to one’s own faith can be imagined.

That is a gift of inestimable value that flows from Freddie Garcia to us. It renders insignificant whatever gift flows from us to Pastor Freddie.

William A. Schambra is the director of Hudson Institute’s Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal, which was founded in 2003 to explore the usually unexamined intellectual assumptions underlying the grantmaking practices of America’s foundations and provide practical advice and guidance to grantmakers who seek to support smaller, grassroots institutions in the name of civic renewal. For more information on Schambra’s work and the work of the Bradley Center, please visit the center’s web page at <http://pcr.hudson.org>.