

Faith-Based Charity Pagan Style

"That star you're wearing," the man says as I hand him his breakfast. "That mean you're Wiccan?"

"Yes, it does," I say, with a touch of pride. What a change from ten years ago, to hear the question asked with curiosity rather than distrust. And he knows the "W" word!

"Devil hasn't dragged you down to Hell yet?"

We both laugh. "No sir, no he hasn't!"

"Don't worry," he says, still smiling. "He will." Then he turns away, taking his tray over to a seat in the homeless shelter's dining room.



I should not be surprised. If Jesus failed to convince him with the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) my own little tale of the Pagan and the pancakes will make little difference to his assumptions about my afterlife. But that's OK — I am more concerned with what he knows about my spiritual community in *this* life.

"Charity" is often understood to imply *Christian* charity. "I haven't run into a Pagan faith-based group yet, much less a Pagan group that cares for the poor!" says Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.¹

Like Towey, many people assume that mainstream faiths have cornered the market on "loving hearts." Their assumption stems from ignorance; they really *haven't* heard of Pagans helping those in need. We can change that by *making every act of Pagan charity double as Pagan PR*. Here are some tips to help you more effectively make that announcement in your own community.

1. Act as a Team. Wherever possible, work under the name of an obviously Pagan or Heathen entity. Putting "Mountain Goddess Circle" right there on the soup kitchen volunteer schedule is an easy way to tell the world who is at work. When someone asks the inevitable question, "So what church are you doing this with?" you will have a surprising answer for them.

This strategy is open to solitary practitioners, too. Do you take part in community rituals? Do you go to weekly coffee klatches or monthly Pagan Night Out gatherings? See if there is interest among your social set. You need not try to organize a large event; grab a close friend or two, give yourselves a group moniker, and roll with it.

But what if you know of no other Pagans in your area? Consider applying for membership in a larger organization, like Covenant of the Goddess (<http://www.cog.org/>) or Pagan Education Network (<http://www.bloomington.in.us/~pen/>), and see if you can perform community service as a representative of your local chapter. (Remember, you must get the organization's explicit permission to do this! Never assume!) If you prefer to do your good deeds solo, you can perform them under your Craft name, or you can skip this step and focus on one of the others.

2. Be a visible representative of your faith while volunteering. For instance, if the establishment's dress code allows, wear a tasteful pentagram or other religious symbol. Eventually someone may ask you about that pentagram or Goddess T-shirt. "Isn't that star Satanic?" they might say, or "Do you really believe in a Goddess?" "What's Wicca/Paganism?" "Does witchcraft really work?" If, like me, you tend to stammer when put on the spot, take some time to develop a handful of brief but educational responses.

es. No matter how ignorant or provoking the question, be ready to answer with confidence and a sense of humor. You have made yourself a representative of your faith; try to give the best impression you possibly can.

Of course, if you donate items instead of time, you and your Pagan jewelry will not be on hand when your donations reach their target. So remember to *label your gifts* – *without belaboring the recipients!* Identify the donation's source in a way that informs but does not imply a faith-based obligation. Your gift tag should be no more intrusive than the "from" line on a birthday card. "A gift from the Red Deer Coven," or a simple "Blessed Be!" will do the trick. "Never hunger, never thirst" can also be appropriate. Use your imagination, and keep in mind how you would react if you were the recipient.

3. Use an Umbrella. For some types of donations, umbrella organizations exist to help keep track of and identify gifts coming from Pagan donors. You are probably already familiar with Pagan Pride Day "Share The Harvest" food drives (<http://www.paganpride.org/>) that take place all over the country at Autumn Equinox. Charity fiber crafts also have a patron; the Hearthfire Guild (www.hearthfireguild.org/) provides tag templates you can affix to your knitted, crocheted, and quilted creations. Make sure to do your research; Pagan Pride Day groups can only donate to 501(c)3 organizations. And remember to report your totals, because groups like Hearthfire keep a running tally of items donated under their auspices. This further increases the visibility of the good work Pagans do.

4. Toot Your Own Horn. If you are organizing a charity event, you have even more of an opportunity to toot your own horn. *Publicize your event as much as possible!* Do not skip this step out of a misguided sense of humility. Publicity is essential to the success of your event.

Tack fliers everywhere you can legally do so; hand them out to shop owners for display in their windows. Submit press advisories to nearby newspapers so they can list your activity in their calendars and, even better, send journalists your way. Most papers will be glad to run an upbeat feature about local do-gooders.

Then, immediately after the event wraps up, issue a formal press release to the same newspapers. This is an article that you write, exactly as you hope to see it printed, that tells how much money was raised, how many items were donated, and who benefitted from the event. It should also say how to contact you to get involved next time.

Remember: the charity event itself takes priority over its organizer's religion; order the information in your public announcements accordingly: "A food drive to benefit the Midtown Soup Kitchen will run from Aug. 1 - Sept. 30. Place non-perishable food items in designated receptacles at local grocery stores. For more information, contact regional Pagan Pride Day liaison Diana Moonglow at (123) 555-1234." Notice how the religious affiliation comes with the contact info at the very end. The details about the event and who it benefits are given precedence. Not only

does this keep the emphasis where it belongs, but it also lets the suggestion of warm meals for hungry people blunt the potential scare factor of the word "Pagan."

4. Turn challenges into opportunities. Some non-profits have actually proven too wary of minority faiths to work with them, no matter how noble the cause. Hopefully, this won't happen to you, but if it does, you can still have a positive outcome. First, stay calm. Be generous with benefit of the doubt. Unless a charity says straight out "No donations from Witches!" give them every opportunity to cite some other problem – and hear your solution. Is their food storage completely full? Perhaps you could offer instead to raise money. Is their volunteer schedule totally booked? Doubtless they will need on-call substitutes for when the scheduled volunteers cannot show. It is rare for a charitable organization to have no needs left unmet, but you may have to alter your offer to meet those needs.

If despite all your flexibility this group persists in putting you off specifically because of your religion, do not get confrontational. Your audience has fears which your example must dispel, not confirm. Resist the temptation to rebuke them; putting them on the defensive will only harden them against you.



Don't get discouraged; continue your search for another non-profit. Look one in the same area – this will make it easier for the organization that refused your help to see the good work from which they might have benefitted.

If you cannot find any local non-profit willing to work with you, try getting in contact with a larger group, like UNICEF or the Red Cross. These international, secular organizations know the value of your aid and will not give you a faith test before accepting it.

Be sure to issue an after-the-fact press release about how you handled the situation. Any difficulty you had finding a recipient might make the local newspapers even more interested in running a story about it. You want word of your generosity and success to get back to that first non-profit, which might react by being better disposed toward you when you call next year. It is also possible that a new person may be making the decisions by then, someone who does not need to have donations baptized before accepting them.

5. Keep doing the work. The help you are offering will reach the people who need it most. And the message you are trying to spread will reach the ears that are ready to hear it— that charity is not just the responsibility of one religion or another, but rather of all humanity. And Pagans are already doing their part. ▲

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