

Justice and the Limits of Charity

This is a 2001 article from [The Other Side](#) exploring the tension between charity and justice. Out of my years of working with individuals within a faith community that has many ministries to the poor, I began wondering about the side effects of our charity. Both charity and justice are necessary, but it's important to know about the ways our charity might work against justice if we hope to ameliorate that impact.

The words of the prophet Micah are familiar:

What does the Lord require of you?
To act justly,
to love mercy and
to walk humbly with your God. (8:6)

But what if our love of mercy chokes our ability to act justly?

Since 1983, I have worked as a doctor with poor people in the inner city of Washington, D.C. I began at Community of Hope Health Services, a small church-sponsored clinic, and at Christ House, a 34-bed medical recovery shelter for homeless men. In 1990, I founded Joseph's House, a 11-bed community for homeless men with AIDS where I work now. I intend to continue working there. But I've been having misgivings.

I have begun to see some "side effects" to the kind of work I do, and they deal with the important difference between justice and charity. Justice has to do with fairness, with what people deserve. It results from social structures that guarantee moral rights. Charity has to do with benevolence or generosity. It results from people's good will, and can be withdrawn whenever they choose.

To put the question most bluntly: Do our works of charity *impede* the realization of justice in our society?

This is not a question of our personal commitment to justice. Throughout all of my years in Washington, I have yearned for justice and felt ready to sacrifice for it. I have hoped that my work brings attention to the plight of the poor and thus contributes to justice.

What I actually *do*, however, is offer help to poor people. Though I believe God calls me to do this, I could leave at any time. The poor people I have served over the past seventeen years have had no “right” to what I was giving them. While I believe in justice for the poor and in challenging the structures of our society that deprive them of that justice, in fact I have offered charity.

My overall concern is this: Charitable endeavors such as Joseph’s House serve to relieve the pressure for more fundamental societal changes. In her book *Sweet Charity*, sociologist Janet Poppendieck writes that charity acts as “a sort of a ‘moral safety valve’; it reduces the discomfort evoked by visible destitution in our midst by creating the illusion of effective action and offering us myriad ways of participating in it. It creates a culture of charity that normalizes destitution and legitimates personal generosity as a response to [injustice].”

I was reminded of this recently when I attended a Walk for the Homeless in Washington, one of those many good and important efforts to raise money for Joseph’s House and similar organizations. Before we left to walk, a nationally known sports star gave a little pep talk, exhorting the walkers to “go out and *do your part* to end homelessness.” I have nothing against the walk, and I suspect the sports star did not really intend the implication, but walking five kilometers on a beautiful Saturday morning is not “doing your part to end homelessness.”

Something similar certainly happens at Joseph’s House itself. How many of our contributors and volunteers end up feeling that their participation with us fulfills their responsibilities to the poor? It will not be a conscious thought, of course. But you come down and volunteer for a while, or you write a check, and it feels good. Perhaps you develop a close relationship with a formerly homeless man with AIDS, and you realize your common humanity. You feel a real satisfaction in that. You bring your children. But in the process you risk forgetting what a scandal it is that Joseph’s House or your local soup kitchen is needed in the first place, forgetting that it is no coincidence your new friend is black, poor, illiterate, and unskilled. It is easy to lose an appropriate sense of outrage.

I am also concerned that places like Joseph's House may reassure voters and policy makers that the problem is being taken care of. Joseph's House gets a fair amount of publicity; we are well known around the city. So when the issue of AIDS and homelessness arises in people's mind, it can be mentally checked off: "Look at Joseph's House! Is not it wonderful! I guess things aren't as bad as we thought."

Soup kitchens and shelters started as emergency responses to terrible problems—to help ensure that people do not starve, or die from the elements. No one, certainly not their founders, ever considered these services as appropriate permanent solutions to the problems. But soup kitchens and food pantries are now our standard response to hunger; cities see shelters as adequate housing for the homeless. Our church-sponsored shelters can camouflage the fact that charity has replaced an entitlement to housing that was lost when the federally subsidized housing program was gutted twenty years ago. Soup kitchens can mask unconscionable cuts in food stamps.

Furthermore, if we are busy caring for the poor, who is going to do the time-consuming work of advocacy, of changing the system? Lots of "people power" goes into running Joseph's House: We have board members, staff, and volunteers. Even those of us who understand that our charity does not satisfy the demands of justice have little time or energy left for advocacy work. Day-to-day responsibilities and frequent emergencies leave few opportunities to picket, to write the editor, to testify before a commission. Those of us who care the most may be the least able to get involved.

For most of us, the work of advocacy is less rewarding than day-to-day contact with needy people. It is less direct. As an advocate I may never see significant change; I would rather immerse myself in direct service. And so the desperately needed work of advocacy is left undone.

A more subtle problem is that many social ministries may unwittingly contribute to the perception that governmental programs for the poor are inefficient and wasteful, and are better "privatized." The last twenty years have seen a harsh turn against government. People in our society who oppose justice for the poor have used the inevitable organizational problems within some government programs to smear *any* kind of governmental action. One of their favorite tools is the supposed "efficiency" of nonprofit organizations.

It is true that nonprofits can often do things with relatively little money—primarily because of

all the volunteered hours, the donated goods, the low or non-existent salaries, the space donated by churches, and so forth. Government programs do not ordinarily get these enormous infusions of free time and materials, so of course they are more expensive than ours. But “expensive” is different from “inefficient.”

Only the government—that is, “we the people,” acting in concert locally, state-wide, or nationally—can guarantee rights, can create or oversee programs that assure everyone adequate access to what they need. Because government can assure entitlements while Joseph’s House cannot, comparing the two is not even appropriate. Still, the comparison is used to rail against government action for justice.

And what of charity’s toll on the recipients’ human dignity? Charity may be necessary, but charity—especially long-term charity—wounds. Try as we might to make our programs humane, it is still we who are the givers and they who are the receivers. Charity thus “acts out” inequality. Poppendieck writes that charity excuses the recipient from the usual socially required obligation to repay, which means sacrificing some piece of that recipient’s dignity.

We hear much talk these days about “faith-based organizations” as appropriate tools for dealing with social ills—perhaps even replacing government as the primary provider of services to the needy. But while they may usefully play a role, faith-based organizations cannot be a substitute for government.

Consider, for example, Joseph’s House. In our care for homeless people with AIDS, Joseph’s House depends on the good will of an enormous number of people. We were founded only with the extraordinary support of a nationally known faith community (Washington D.C.’s Church of the Savior), plus the gifts of many people. Even now, local foundations and several thousand individuals and churches across the country provide support, and most of our professional staff have salaries considerably below what they could earn elsewhere. All this is certainly not unique, but it is hardly commonplace.

So what happens in a place that does not have a faith community with a national list of donors? What happens when the people who want start a house such as ours are already tied up working in soup kitchens and health clinics or providing food and shelter to homeless people in their churches? What happens if the local populace is not interested in caring for homosexuals or drug users? In all those cases, *nothing* happens—because homeless men with AIDS do not have an *entitlement* to

o food, shelter, and appropriate nursing care.

Even if there were enough well intentioned people in every community, where would the money come from? Like most nonprofits, Joseph's House receives much of its funding (in our case almost two-thirds) from the local and federal governments. Even with that funding, we share the lament of other similar nonprofits: There is so much more we could be doing, so many more people who need help. But no one who is implying that faith-based organizations should take over the care of homeless persons with AIDS is also talking about increasing taxes to fund them. And without those increases, charity is not going to replace taxes as a solution for this problem.

As for faith-based organizations providing for *all* the needs of the poor, the chances are even more remote. Some idea of the magnitude of the problem comes from Rebecca Blank, a government economist during the Bush administration and author of

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, an excellent, balanced look at American poverty. She points out that if we asked churches to pay the costs of only three government programs—welfare for families, disability payments for the poor, and food stamps—every single church, synagogue, mosque, and other religious congregation would have to come up with \$300,000 a year. For the average congregation, this would mean tripling its budget and spending all of the increase on the poor. If, instead, we asked the nonprofit charitable institutions that currently serve the poor to foot this bill, they would need their contributions to increase seven-fold. Add in Medicaid, and the need for additional funding more than doubles!

Our charitable works, then, simply cannot provide care for all who need it. Yet our projects can give the illusion that charity is the solution.

At another level, the fundamental problem for the poor in our country is not homelessness or AIDS or hunger or the like—or even any combination of these. They are just symptoms; the *problem*

is injustice. In promoting our institutions, it is natural to emphasize the importance of our own project. But this can lead to subtle impressions that if we just distribute enough food, or create enough bed space, or find enough homes—that is, if we just treat the symptoms—we will have solved “the problem.”

Injustice, however, is more deep-seated. It is the inevitable result of the structures of our

society—economic, governmental, social, and religious—that undergird inequality. The way things stand now, poverty is built into these systems.

Consider just the economics. Despite the US poverty rate being the lowest since the 1970s, despite the lowest unemployment rate in thirty years and the rise in the minimum hourly wage to \$5.15, one out of eight Americans is still poor. Among children below the age of six, one in four lives in a poor family.

What are the economic structures that keep poor people trapped in their poverty?

The first is low wages. The big change in American poverty over the last twenty years has been the decline in wages among the less skilled, leaving many *full-time* workers in poverty. Of the people who are below the poverty line, thirty percent live in families with at least one full-time worker. In 1970, a single mother working full-time at minimum wage could pull herself and two children out of poverty. Today, a minimum-wage job leaves a parent and *one* child below the poverty line.

Another is unemployment. The national unemployment rate is just four percent, but this figure is deceptive. It does not include involuntary part-time workers (increasingly common as employers avoid paying benefits); those who have dropped out of the work force altogether (for example, those who are so discouraged they are no longer even looking for work); those who are incarcerated; or those with jobs that do not pay them enough to stave off poverty.

Yet another is lost or inadequate unemployment benefits. Fewer than half of the unemployed collect any unemployment benefits and only for six months. For those who do, the average benefit is forty percent of one's previous earnings—not much if the previous earnings were minimum wage.

Also dragging down the poor is the high cost of housing. Of all the US households with incomes below the poverty line, nearly half (forty-five percent) spend more than seventy percent of their money on rent and utilities.

Other industrialized countries have developed economic safety nets for people who fall into poverty. But the “safety net” in the United States is so shredded it no longer deserves the name.

Charity does little to change the wider social and political systems that sustain injustice. In fact, most charities depend heavily on the very volunteers, individual donors, and institutions that have prospered under the current systems. And people who have done well in a system are usually not interested in changing it drastically—in fact, they may be diametrically opposed. So even if we ourselves perceive the need for systemic changes, we may feel compelled to whisper those perceptions rather than shout them for fear of alienating those on whom we most depend. Charity offends almost no one; at one point or another, justice offends practically everyone.

I am not, of course, suggesting that we abandon charity. As an adjunct to justice, charity is both necessary in our current situation and a requirement of our faith. But we must acknowledge the broader implications of our charity and recognize that it alone is not enough. That done, we need to start thinking about ways for our charitable organizations to support those who work for justice.

Our promotional materials, for example, must at least *refer* to systemic factors, recognizing that charity is not the solution.

We must be careful about comparing our work to, or even alluding to, the “inefficiency” of government programs.

We must offer our volunteers reading materials, seminars, and discussion opportunities about the systemic issues. By putting themselves into face-to-face contact with the poor, they have taken an important first step. We need to encourage them to continue the journey.

We must include education as part of our mission. This can mean talking about larger issues in our newsletters and donor appeals. Perhaps it will result in a few people dropping their financial support, but that is the type of risk our organizations need to take.

We must engage in political advocacy. By law, tax-exempt organizations are able to use portions of their budget for advocacy. What if every social ministry dedicated five percent of its budget, freeing up time for staff to preach sermons, to speak on justice issues in small groups at our churches, to testify before government commissions, to write letters to their newspaper, to call or write our elected representatives?

We must get behind the effort to drastically change campaign financing. Though barred from supporting individual candidates, nonprofits can use this election year to emphasize that the United States will not be an effective democracy until the enormous influence of money on government decisions is reduced. “We the people” currently have little power to persuade our representatives to vote for justice.

Working for justice is messier and far less rewarding than charity. There are no quick fixes, and the most common reason for quitting is discouragement. But we have little choice. Within an unjust society, there are limitations to our charity; we need to join others in the struggle for justice as well. It is a fundamental requirement of our faith.

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