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Linking research and practice to change lives, neighborhoods, and communities

The J. McDonald Williams Institute, research arm of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, is dedicated to conducting non-partisan outcomes research and public policy evaluation related to comprehensive community revitalization of low-income urban areas.

Charity and Social Justice: What Do We Owe the Poor?

BY

MARCUS M. MARTIN, MA, PhD, MPH

DIRECTOR, THE J. MCDONALD WILLIAMS INSTITUTE

TIMOTHY BRAY, PhD

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, THE J. MCDONALD WILLIAMS INSTITUTE

JULIE KIBLER, MLS

EDITORIAL & RESEARCH CONSULTANT

Charity will never be true charity unless it takes justice into account ... Let no one attempt with small gifts of charity to exempt themselves from the great duties imposed by justice.

—Pope Pius XI, Divini Redemptoris , #49 (Charity and Justice, 2006)

This research brief endeavors to define the concepts of charity and social justice. We will explain the difference between the two in an effort to demonstrate how charity alone does not generally bring about the empowerment necessary to effect lasting change. We will show that social justice is the desirable activity and outcome, manifested in creating equity in economic, political, educational, and social markets.

CHARITY DEFINED

The word *charity* has its original roots in Middle English, Old French, Late Latin, Latin, Old Irish, and Sanskrit words, referring to *love*, *Christian love, dearness*, and *friendship* (Merriam-Webster Online, 2006). Merriam-Webster Online (2006) gives several variations on the modern definitions of charity:

> *1 : benevolent goodwill toward or love of humanity*
> *2 a : generosity and helpfulness especially toward the needy or suffering; also : aid given to those in need b : an institution engaged in relief of the poor c : public provision for the relief of the needy*
> *3 a : a gift for public benevolent purposes b : an institution (as a hospital) founded by such a gift*
> *4 : lenient judgment of others*

Paul, in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13 of the Bible's New Testament, refers to charity as the "greatest" act, exalting it above even faith and hope. Encyclopedia Britannica Online (Charity, 2006) describes charity as the "reciprocal love between God and man that is made manifest in unselfish love of one's fellow men." This source identifies charity as a translation of the Greek word *agape*, which also translates to *love,* and offers St. Augustine's summary of Christian thought on the subject: "Charity is a virtue which, when our affections are perfectly ordered, unites us to God, for by it we love him." (Charity, 2006)

The Britannica Student Encyclopedia (Foundations and charities, 2006) notes that all the major world religions "have as one of their chief aims provision of service to those in need." They list several examples of charitable services performed by religious groups, such as food and clothing collection; refugee aid; hospital, orphanage, and senior citizen home operation; counseling and medical service; disaster relief; and projects in Third World countries.

Current statistics (IRS Business Master File, 2004; National Center for Charitable Statistics at the Urban Institute, 2006) on the number of 501(c)(3) charities in the United States indicate:

- The number of charities in the United States in 2004 was more than 822,000.
- The gross receipts of those charities in 2004 was more than $1.3 trillion.
- The total assets of those charities in 2004 was more than $2.4 trillion.
- There were more than 54,000 charities in Texas in 2004.
- The gross receipts of Texas charities in 2004 exceeded $63 billion.
- The total assets of Texas charities in 2004 exceeded $77 billion.
- The number of public charities in Texas increased by 21,000 between 1996 and 2004.

With the prolific needs of our society, especially in light of the recent natural disasters faced by states such as Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, few can question the value of most of these public charities and the good work they do. There are, however, questions surrounding the issue of whether certain types of charity truly empower the poor.

WHERE CHARITY FALLS SHORT: COMPARING CHARITY TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

— 2 Corinthians 8:13-15, referring to Exodus 16:18 (NIV)

The Office for Social Justice of the Catholic Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis (Charity and justice, 2006) gives some explanation of charity in the context of the differences between *works of charity* and *works of social justice*. Works of charity are described based on the scriptural reference to the biblical New Testament story of the Good Samaritan—the story does not attempt to explore the causes of the banditry that happens to the victim, but simply demonstrates how the Samaritan provides temporary and immediate relief. This source, then, describes works of charity as:

- Private, individual acts
- Responses to immediate need
- Providing direct service (e.g., food, clothing, shelter)
- Requiring repeated actions
- Being directed at the effects of social injustice (i.e., the symptoms)

Examples given of works of charity are homeless shelters, food banks, clothing drives, and emergency services.

Works of social justice are described based on the scriptural reference to the biblical Old Testament story of the Exodus, whereby Moses "does not ask for food and medicine for the Jewish slave-labor force. He challenges the institutional system" (Charity and Justice, 2006). Works of social justice are described by this source as:

- Public, collective actions
- Responses to long-term need
- Promoting social change in institutions
- Resolving structural injustice
- Being directed at the root causes of social injustice

Examples given of works of social justice here are legislative advocacy, corporate policies or practices change, and congregation-based community organizing.

It is clear from these comparisons that charity is generally not a long-term solution to many of the structural or institutional issues facing our society, such as poverty and inequality. It may more or less be serving as the "band-aid" that temporarily soothes a condition, while not healing it. Thus, charity, while certainly a critical ingredient in the process of effecting social justice, may not be able to stand alone in improving the plight of the poor or reducing inequality.

What distinguishes charity from social justice is overwhelmingly the issue of *empowerment*. Charity may assist the poor or reduce the suffering of the poor, but charity may never empower the poor when it is not aimed at or calling into question the institutional arrangements of our society and whether or not those institutions are disadvantageous to the poor. In addition to questioning the equity or fairness of the economic, political, and social institutions of our society, social justice calls on individuals to work in a *collective* fashion to refine and reshape these institutions so they can be more equitable for all citizens.

This is illustrated in an article exploring the potential for universities to collaborate with communities in seeking social change. Marullo and Edwards (2000) posed six questions that help clarify whether community services acts are simply acts of charity or whether they can be considered acts of charity leading to social justice. The questions were designed to indicate whether

strategies of either *politicization* (recruiting citizens into a transformational process that will help them to become change agents) or *institutional transformation* (altering leadership roles and partnerships between communities and universities so they are involved in the process of change) are being implemented (Marullo & Edwards, 2000).

The same questions, which we have reworded here to reflect the general issue of works of charity in contrast with works of justice, can be applied in other environments.

1) Does the work undertaken empower the recipients?

Marullo & Edwards (2000) demonstrated the point of this question by referring to the saying by Lao Tzu: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." They emphasize that charity stops with feeding the hungry, or possibly even with holding a "fishing workshop" but not following through on its effectiveness. The authors further note that when charity stops at this point, there is the danger that a sense of superiority may develop among those doing the act of charity.

2) Do those doing the work "examine whether and how their service work helps to address the root causes of the problem?"

Marullo & Edwards illustrated this question with the story of the village in African folklore whose babies are swept away by the river unless the village works together to rescue the baby. The village may even eventually set up a system whereby they post lookouts to watch for babies swept into the water, but they are mistaken if they believe this will solve the problem of babies drowning in the river if they have not also addressed the reason the babies are wandering close to the water in the first place.

3) Does the work encourage those involved to understand that the shortcomings of the individuals served are not the only cause of the problems they are trying to address?

Marullo & Edwards explained that because there is a limited number of resources to go around, when an individual is helped and becomes more independent, the result may be another individual going without that resource and in essence taking the place of the original individual. Donors are then frustrated by the cycle and may begin to believe that the failure to reduce poverty overall may indeed be a result of a certain shared characteristic they observe among those they serve.

The problem here is not in the characteristic, but in the failure to fix the problem along with helping the individual (e.g., if there are a limited number of living-wage jobs to go around, address the lack of policy that creates enough living-wage jobs).

4) Are institutional operations organized in a fashion that supports and sustains the collaborative efforts of the donors, the workers, and the recipients?

Marullo & Edwards suggested that because this requires extensive time and effort, and often funds, while a small number of individuals may continue to carry on in a manner that will support and sustain appropriate change, it will not become the "norm" unless the processes are standardized and each part of the collaborative team, or a "critical mass," adheres to them.

The authors described this phenomenon in the context of the university–community collaboration and discussed how difficult it may be to challenge the status quo. Doing so may even result in negative consequences for faculty engaged in the process because the university setting is traditionally geared toward rewarding the "science of discovery" as opposed to "application, integration, and pedagogy [teaching]" (p. 907).

They related this to the possibility that even the community service organization may have established "norms" and reward systems that disempower rather than empower those served. Marullo & Edwards stressed that in any situation, the climate of systemic change must begin in

every part of the collaborative team—whether in top-down or bottom-up change.

5) Does the collaboration build community, increase social capital, and enhance diversity?

The operating procedures of the organization should be based on these goals. Marullo & Edwards noted that the collaborative team should discuss the goals and determine how they can be met. The authors also wrote that simply discussing these goals is a "social good," in that it educates the various entities involved that the current culture of nihilism, or "unbridled pursuit of property, power, and pleasure," is not the only available option. They pointed out that research actually indicates the "need for values such as altruism and mutual support for human survival, our reliance on networks of others to sustain ourselves and achieve our goals, and the richness and progress of social life due to differences" (p. 908).

6) Do organizations operate their community partnership programs in accord with social justice principles?

Marullo & Edwards asked here whether adequate intellectual and developmental support is provided for the programs. They stressed that it is critical that programs not be operated simply to use the community as a "social laboratory," specifically here in relationship to the school or university community service setting. They also reminded the reader that the organization must partner with those in the community, giving over authority and control to them when needed to promote equality among the collaborators, to ensure that the needs of those served is the highest priority.

The article concluded with a reminder of Ghandi's dictum—that it is not enough to do good for the wrong reasons; one's reasons for doing good must also be good. Their reasoning is that service for wrong or even selfish motives might not only lead to insensitivity, disrespect, or indignity, but also "will reproduce unjust structures, and fail in the long run to stem the tide of injustice" (p. 910).

Social Justice and Inequality

The reality of our current economic system is that it can be characterized by rising income inequality (new revenues) and an ever-increasing concentration of wealth (accumulated assets) shared by few. For example:

- The income inequality gap in America is wider than in any other developed nation (Bernstein, McNichol, & Lyons, 2006).
- The average annual income for the top 5% of families in Texas was roughly $203,000 compared to an average annual income of roughly $14,000 for the bottom 20% of families in Texas (Bernstein, McNichol, & Lyons, 2006).
- Average annual incomes for the top 5% of families in the U.S. continue to rise at a much faster rate than the incomes for the bottom 20% of families in the U.S. (Martin & Bray, 2006).
- The state of Texas has the second highest income disparity ratio between average income for the top 5% of families and the bottom 20% of families—only the state of Arizona has a higher top-to-bottom income ratio (Bernstein, McNichol, & Lyons, 2006).
- Previous analysis by the Foundation for Community Empowerment found that a total of 90,632 Dallas children live in distressed neighborhoods, while 25,042 of those children lived in neighborhoods that were severely distressed (neighborhood poverty levels of greater than 30%).

The true significance of these inequalities lies not in the statistics, but in the lives of those impacted by them. On nearly every measured indicator, those who are the lowest wage earners—the poor—fare the worst. This is evident in a recent analysis by the J. McDonald Williams Institute, which found that those most likely to vote in the city of Dallas and Dallas County live in communities with median incomes above $50,000, while those least likely to vote live in communities

with median incomes below the poverty line, and those most likely to experience premature mortality and the highest rates of chronic disease mortality reside in the most economically distressed areas of the city (Martin, Bray, & Byerly, 2006).

As a result, lives are lost, dreams are deferred, and the true spirit of belief in the American dream and upward social mobility are diminished. In fact, many children in the United States face the stark reality that they may not be able attain the type of inter-generational mobility that their parents experienced, while the truly poor (roughly 45 million Americans) are finding themselves repeating the cycles of poverty endured by their parents and grandparents. An argument can be made that charity may not be enough for many of our poorest citizens. The fundamental changes needed for many of our neediest citizens are new models of economic, political, and social justice.

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Foundation for Community Empowerment is deeply rooted in a strongly held belief in the social justice model, and we call on others who are able to not only support the work of public charities, but also work with us as agents of institutional change—agents for social justice. Equity in the economic, political, educational, and social markets is a necessity for the creation of a just and peaceful society—not to mention that it is biblically based. Additionally, engaging in a *collective efficacy* or *common good* mentality by those at the top of our social, economic, and political ladders is one of the key components to closing the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots."

A collective efficacy based on the notion of social justice, and not just on charity, will reshape the way we see one another and offer the potential to correct some of the structural imbalances evident in many of our institutions.

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For more information about The J. McDonald Williams Institute, Analyze Dallas, or FCE, contact Dr. Marcus Martin, MA, PhD, MPH at:

Foundation for Community Empowerment
2001 Ross Avenue
Suite 3350
Dallas, Texas 75201
469.221.0700 phone
469.221.0701 fax
mmartin@fcedallas.org

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Analyze Dallas seeks to become a catalyst toward real progress and change in the city of Dallas and is based on the philosophy that measurement is followed by impact.

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FCE, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, was founded in 1995 by J. McDonald "Don" Williams, Chairman Emeritus of the Trammell Crow Company. FCE is a catalyst for the revitalization of low-income neighborhoods in Dallas through the empowerment of individuals, community- and faith-based organizations, and entire communities. FCE seeks to build bridges of opportunity, and to foster relationships where investments of money, time, people, and resources should be made.

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