

MOVING FROM CHARITY TOWARDS JUSTICE IN OUTREACH MINISTRIES

by John Asling

We're in a rut!

After nearly 14 years of working with congregations involved in mission outreach efforts in Hamilton Conference, I am convinced that many of us are stuck in a rut of charity and need to get out of it and onto the road towards justice. Our fixation on charity may be doing more harm than good for the very people we profess to help – the poor, the weak and the marginalized of our communities. I am hopeful that we can make the transition from charity towards justice in our mission outreach ministries but only if we are prepared to take our Bible and our theology seriously.

Some will find this discussion provocative or political. It is. But if we are to be true healers of our communities, our congregations must begin to rethink their involvement in charity programs like food banks at home and Christmas shoeboxes efforts abroad. We need to become vital and prepared to risk in our ministries as Spirit-filled Christians who understand the political or community dimensions of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our relevance as people of faith is at stake, as is the fate of our communities.

Some will argue that charity and justice are two sides of the same coin and that doing charity work is just as important as justice efforts. They would say it is a matter of call: some are called to works of charity, others to doing justice. I am not convinced. There is clearly a connection between charity and justice and perhaps a source of hope in this discussion is that with so much charity work happening in our churches, there is fertile ground for planting seeds of justice. But they are not the same; it is not just a matter of call or opportunity or taste.

As we read in the Old Testament, “God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) The New Testament says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cummin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.” (Matthew 23: 23)

I went into a recent study time with a few rough ideas of the difference between charity and justice. Now I have an even greater appreciation for why we ought to be doing justice, not just charity, and a few ideas on how to get started. First, consider the following:

“What the poor need is not sandwiches and sleeping bags alone. What binds and immobilizes them is not bad people but structures and patterns of relating built up over many generations, what Paul calls ‘principalities and powers’ and ‘spiritual forces of wickedness in high places.’ Succour for the poor is important but not enough.” (Bruce McLeod)

“I learned that justice and charity were two different, although not unrelated, responses which one could make to the problem of poverty. I became aware of how one responded to the symptoms of poverty through charity and how one addressed the causes of that poverty by working to change the social structures which perpetuated such misery.” (Mary Jo Leddy)

“Charity, as we have been practicing it, is satisfying our desires and then passing on some of

- what is left over; justice requires adjusting our desires to the needs of others so that there is a planetary sharing of what we all have a right to.” (Douglas Roche)
- “When shall we have the courage to outgrow the charity mentality and see that at the bottom of all relations between rich and poor there is the problem of justice.” (Dom Helder Camara)
- “Charity depends on the vicissitudes of whim and personal wealth; justice depends on commitment instead of circumstance. Faith-based charity provides crumbs from the table; faith-based justice offers a place at the table.” (Bill Moyers)
- “We need to do more than pull people out of the river before they drown; someone needs to go upstream to see who or what is throwing them in. Asking why so many people are poor, why the affluent are so unhappy, or why the political process seems to be broken can get you into trouble, but also might lead to some real solutions.” (Jim Wallis)
- “There are significant limits to what charity can do. Ordinarily charity deals with personal needs of an immediate nature and does not deal with root causes of injustice and human suffering. Sometimes charity can become a barrier to doing the more difficult work of justice...Justice focuses on basic causes of oppression, inequality and disenfranchisement. It seeks to change public policy and public priorities.” (Nile Harper)
- “Our attempts as churches to feed, clothe and house the homeless may only obscure the true causes of homelessness and fill us with false righteousness. But what we can do is create an insistent demand that homelessness be eradicated.” (Walter Wink)

Called to do Justice

Before we engage in the world-transforming work of justice we have to take seriously the “principalities and powers.” Walter Wink says the biblical “principalities and powers” refer to the structures and institutions that embody the Domination System (where one group has domination over another) in any given time in history. Jesus revealed for the very first time (although the prophets foreshadowed his ministry) God’s domination-free order of nonviolent love. Jesus denounced the Domination System of his day and proclaimed and personified the dawning of God’s reign, which is to transform all aspects of life, even the political or community life.

“The gospel has a very specific context, even if it has been essentially the same context for 5,000 years: the Domination System. And the gospel has a specific response to that system: the liberating message of Jesus. The gospel is a context-specific remedy for the evils of the Domination System.” To put it bluntly, Wink says the gospel doesn’t call us to tinker a bit with the system or fill its gaps. It calls for radical transformation. “Only God can bring this about in its entirety... It is our task to create the conditions” that would make it possible.

Our mission is to disclose the true spirituality of systems (governments, corporations, organizations) and where they remain unjust, to de-legitimize them by creating a “spiritual counterculture” that is rooted in real world justice. “All our letter writing, petitioning, political and community organizing, demonstrating, civil disobedience, prayer and fasting moves to this end: to recall the powers to the humanizing purposes of God revealed in Jesus,” Wink says.

Creating food banks, Out of the Cold Programs, Habitat for Humanity Projects and sending shoeboxes with Christmas presents for children in developing countries will not transform the world into a place of justice. In fact those efforts let us off the hook. We need to find out why people are hungry and homeless and mobilize to do something about it. What is it about the way we organize ourselves as a community that leaves some marginalized? What can we do to change that? We need to do the social analysis and the biblical and theological homework to discern our route. This is not a condemnation of the above named programs and those who volunteer their

time. Most of us are stuck one place or another in the charity rut. We need to work together to get on to the road towards justice and not be judgmental. Perhaps we can understand charity and justice as being on a continuum with charity that serves only ourselves at one end, charity that is truly relational in the middle and justice at the other end.

Jim Wallis says the first partnership on the road to justice is with those on the fringes of society. Reaching “down” to them in our spare time with our middleclass values is superficial charity. “Jesus did not suggest the answer to poverty was for the rich and powerful to volunteer some of their time to the poor and teach the value of success, but rather for rich and poor to undergo a change of heart and create a new community where everyone has a place at the table,” Wallis says. That may mean, as Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Community suggested, finding ways to stay closer to those who are victimized by power rather than cozying up to the powerful.

Wallis says the greatest heresy of 20th Century American religion was to make faith a purely personal matter. We have done the same with social issues. If a family is having trouble making ends meet, we figure it is their problem only; we tell them they need financial counseling, personal transformation, a food bank. Wallis understands the need for personal transformation but says: “Many people work hard and full time yet remain poor. That’s a social, and fundamentally moral, issue for the society to face. These are structural problems, which can be remedied only by social and economic policy.” Charity won’t get at structural problems; charity lets them continue, makes some of us feel good about reaching down to help out. Justice work asks the tougher moral questions that can lead to real change.

This prophetic ministry is central. “All our religious and spiritual traditions focus on how we treat materially poor and excluded people, and suggest that the state of poor people is a moral test for the health of any society. And those traditions point us beyond mere charity as a response, but call us more prophetically to the deeper solutions of social and economic justice,” Wallis says.

The tinkering, reaching down, doing for (rather than with) approaches that characterize charity are a great temptation to our middleclass church where we spiritualize biblical references to the poor in the Bible. In the developing world, the notion of justice is much easier to understand. Throughout Latin America, poor and oppressed peoples have adopted the phrase “to know God is to do justice” as

a rallying point and sign of hope, says Robert McAfee Brown. Adds Jose Miranda, a Mexican biblical scholar, “Jahweh is known only in the human act of achieving justice and compassion for the neighbour.” Costa Rican Bible scholar Elsa Tamez, speaking of the Magnificat or Mary’s Song, states, “(it) does not speak of individuals undergoing moral change but of the restructuring of the order in which there are rich and poor, mighty and lowly.” Tissa Balasuriya, a Sri Lankan priest, says that every celebration of communion ought to be a renewal of the commitment to do justice. Adds Gustavo Gutierrez: “We must avoid the pitfall of individual charity as though the message of Jesus were about one on one acts of mercy from and to deserving individuals. When we talk about ‘the neighbour,’ we are not just talking about individuals but about a whole network of social relationships, exploited social classes, dominated peoples, communities of the oppressed. There is more to relationship than I-thou.”

South African Cedric Mayson says the church has used Jesus to justify charity as a substitute for justice. “(Jesus) was not saying they should give presents to the poor; he was advocating a new system based not on possessiveness but on sharing, not upon a commitment to grow in personal affluence but in community usefulness.” He adds: “Giving to the poor necessitates not merely an alteration in individual attitudes but in societal structures as well. A genuine and courageous person can be sacrificial in their generosity, drastic in simplifying their necessities, selfless in

their expenditure, and transformed in their attitudes, but new life for the poor demands a change in land values, wage levels, national expenditure, material expectations, and the distribution of the proceeds of production.” Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran martyr, speaking of the story of the Good Samaritan, says helping one traveler does not answer the social problem: “The whole Jericho Road must be transformed.”

Signs of Justice

What would that transformation look like? It depends on where you live but we can learn from others’ experiences. Nile Harper, who has studied the “vital signs” of 28 urban American churches who are attempting to move beyond charity towards justice in their ministries, says the churches came to understand justice as equity. This equity included:

- Shareholding: a commitment to enable every citizen to participate in the political processes.
- Fairness: a commitment to a reasonable distribution of the goods and services that make human life humane.
- Community: a commitment to interdependence, mutuality and responsibility to one another.

Harper warns that the congregations that engaged in this struggle for justice did not find it easy. “The limitations of working for systemic justice are many in number. Justice work takes time. It seeks large-scale goals, which do not come quickly. It does not deal directly with immediate, urgent needs. It involves risk-taking and the investment of large amounts of human and financial resources. It involves political processes and almost always involves conflict and stress in the community.” But there is much good news in moving beyond charity towards justice: through creative leadership and the power of God’s Spirit, acts of charity can develop into positive, collaborative justice work that changes policies and structures that oppress people; many churches have learned that authentic spirituality includes doing justice work; a local congregation, even if it is modest sized, can think and act locally or globally for justice with the right vision.

The justice work portrayed in Harper’s study covered a broad spectrum: acts of support for the poor and oppressed of Latin America, the Middle East, Africa; forming local action networks; letter writing, phone trees on many topics; direct action, mediation, education on sweat shops; taking part in demonstrations around health care; gay rights actions; peace education efforts; creating awareness around homelessness issues, to name just a few. Our own choices might be different, based on a discernment process at the congregational level that might involve *Restoring Communities to Live In*, an important faith-based community development resource from the United Church.

Getting Started

For his part, Harper offers the following guidelines for congregations struggling to move beyond charity towards justice in their mission outreach work:

- Make worship central to this ministry.
- Define your mission positively.
- Reach out and seek partners.
- Focus on one or two basic human needs.
- See the positive assets in your community.
- Make a long-term commitment.
- Tell your story widely.
- Undergird everything with prayer.

Should we close all our food banks and cease all our charitable contributions as congregations today? No. But we do need to start to come up with some strategies that will get us out of the charity rut and onto the road towards justice. Here are a few I can think of. You need to develop more that make sense in your community:

- If your outreach or mission and service committee is just doing charity work, start an advocacy or political action committee to get at the root causes.
- Make a commitment as a congregation to shift out of charity mode and into justice efforts by ceasing to add any new charity work or financial causes.
- Instead of sending shoeboxes of Christmas gifts to the developing world, support the Mission and Service Fund or the World Development and Relief Fund, both of which support transformative justice.
- Start a Charity-to-Justice working group in your congregation to assess all outreach and make recommendations for change.
- Make any charity efforts a true opportunity for relationships with clients from which you can learn about the deeper social issues.
- If your church operates a soup kitchen do a regular debriefing with clients, staff and volunteers and share the information gathered with the congregation to encourage community or political action if needed.
- Always ask why: why are people in my neighbourhood hungry? why are Africans in need? Then ask what: what would be the effective strategy to help make real change.
- Use *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil* and *Restoring Communities to Live In*, key United Church resources, to help you in the transition from a charity to a justice focus.

You will have even better suggestions and I look forward to hearing from you. We are in this together and we must not despair. As *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil* puts it, “Although we may be tempted to deny or despair the injustice around us, saying, ‘there is no alternative,’ the gospel of Christ speaks to us about new hope...To uncover this hope we must unmask the economic order with its aura of inevitability and natural law...It is through daring witness and action for life and for justice that we can be true to our faith and mission and become whole in creation.”

John Asling served as the Hamilton Conference Minister for Mission and Communication from 1988 to 2004.

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