

“Supporting cross-disciplinary FBO collaborations to promote social justice in public health care delivery

ABSTRACT

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) that are engaged in public health and relief initiatives are commonly faulted for ideological assumptions that patronize recipients as charity objects and for failing to engage a human rights perspective that ensures entitlements and equitable capacity building. This is particularly evident in the delivery of food. Outraged at the mission-sponsored helicopter “bread drops” documented in a “Democracy Now!” video interview with earthquake victims, for example, one Haitian community member said, “They should have given to the responsible on the ground to distribute to the rest of the people here, and not when they go back up in the air, throw the bread out like they were throwing bones to dogs” (http://www.democracynow.org/2010/1/22/t_trembl_journey_to_the_epicenter). Such approaches demonstrate not only disrespect for human dignity but also ignorance of the dominant human rights and justice language that defines faith-based narratives regarding poverty relief in all three Western monotheistic traditions, specifically for health equity. This presentation will begin with a summary of where such language occurs in late antique health-related texts that influence the practical development of FBO-sponsored health care delivery into the present. Second, it will outline principles common in non-sectarian public health activities that may intersect with the work of FBOs. Finally, it will suggest how public health care providers might draw on the newly emerging research on such sources in ethical tradition to promote health equity in cross-disciplinary collaboration that advances the practical realization of human rights.

Measurable learning objectives:

1. Discuss key areas for cross-disciplinary health care discussion that can promote collaborative and FBO-supported applications of social justice and human rights principles. 2. Define and compare distinctions between several models of public health relief and capacity building. 3. Identify early historical texts in Western late-antique religious tradition that have an explicit and direct bearing on modern dialogue about social justice, entitlements, and human rights.

POSTER KEYPOINTS:

1. Historical examples of health rights and social justice terms

Most modern Western FBOs are rooted in Jewish, Christian, and/or Islamic ethics. All three traditions in late antiquity practiced public health care using social justice and “rights”-based language. Examples of religious responses to poverty, hunger, disease, and social injustices have survived in Greek, Arabic, Syriac, and Latin. A recent surge in scholarly English translations can advance non-sectarian discussion on the relevance of these historical sources for modern social welfare and health models. Key terms in 4th, 5th, and 6th century religious texts appeal to solidarity, dignity, and healing on the basis of words and concepts such as: *tzedakah* (Hebrew), *sadaqa* (Arabic) and *zedqto* (Syriac), meaning righteousness/justice (the basis for alms); *philoptocheia* / *ptochotropheias* (love of or nurturing and feeding of the destitute poor, both Greek words); and *isonomia* (Greek meaning “equality of rights”).

Examples:

“...You see these people whose frightful disease...awaken disgust. Their hands eaten away, they crawl on wooden props, dragging themselves along the road, half dead, yet supremely human. If this is not bad enough, they are forbidden from the public fountains as if they poison them... [But their] illness cannot be transmitted from the sick to the healthy; the infection does not leave the sick person; will we disparage our own kin and race, those who share our human nature? ... All humanity is governed by a single nature. You belong to the common nature of all...let all therefore be accorded common use.” (Gregory of Nyssa, 4th century CE)

“[The sacred text] orders us to a shared living and mutual love, in natural kinship. After all, humankind is a sociable being. Liberty for the purpose of restoration is a necessary part of the common life and helping one another upward.” (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa’s brother)

[In 6th-century Edessa (modern Syria) the bishop Rabbula] reformed the hospital of his city by improved sanitation until “it was impossible to know that the sick and those with sores were lying there [because of] the care and cleanliness [and] no dirty or vile linen.” He also created “the hospital for women, which had not even existed at all [appointing women nurses]...and he himself often

[personally handled] the rotting men whose bodies were putrefying, strengthen[ing] them so their mind would not lose hope.” (from Doran’s translation of the *Life of Rabbula*)

[note: the above quotes have been slightly amended to aid easy reference for the poster; please refer to original sources (see bibliography below) for verbatim text in context]

2. Bridging paradigms and examples*

SENSING NEED:

“Starvating is a slow evil; the body cools, the form shrivels, the knees drag, the eyes sunken, the belly collapses; whoever has power to alleviate it and instead opts for profit, should be condemned as a murderer.” (Basil of Caesarea, 4th century CE, a famous passage that has been used in Catholic social ethics from both 12th and 20th centuries.

SHARING MATERIAL GOODS:

“When you see a poor person, you are looking at an altar; [the Creator’s] altar is lying everywhere, in the alleys and marketplaces...give such persons honor, and if you see someone else insulting thm, prevent it.” (John Chrysostom, early 5th century)

EMBODY A HEALING OR ‘SACRED’ KINSHIP:

“[The Creator] has abased himself to borrow from you in the persons of the poor...He whom the cherubim comvey on their backs with trembling is smitten on the bed of sickness...When you fill his belly, you will find the bread of life.” (Jacob of Sarug, 6th century Syriac poet)

*For further details on these three paradigms, see Holman, *God Knows There’s Need* (see bibliography below)

3. Effecting Action

APPEAL TO SHARED PRINCIPLES

Both faith-based and non-sectarian organizations at their best share a commitment in public health responses to poverty to:

- a. Respect limis—and health care recipients;
- b. Welcome ideological differences as points for intersecting synergies—talking and working together;
- c. Be sensitive to and even subvert economic gender discrepancies; one leading 7th-century Egyptian religious leader made it a point to give poor women twice he alms he distributed to poor men;
- d. Build the ‘solidarity assets’ of the community;
- e. Be sensitive to the crisis/health needs context, e.g., political/religious; patronage vs. rights; disaster relief vs. equity/justice; role of government, etc.
- f. Avoid perpetuating human rights violations that have occurred in the past.

CASE EXAMPLE: NEW CITY INITIATIVE

As merely one modern example of a program that applies a large number of these guidelines and principles and is explicitly informed by historical religious sources, the New City Initiative is a faith-based project located within a non-sectarian NGO (“JOIN”) in Portland, Oregon, that engages faith communities in civic efforts to end homelessness. Its name comes from the activities of a 4th century civic and religious leader, Basil of Caesarea (see quotes above), whose famine-relief and public health building projects drew so many people that they became known in the region as the “new city.” JOIN’s faith-based coordinator in Portland today has drawn on this model, using a 2009-2010 grant from the Louisville Institute, to mobilize 21st-century collaborations that enable homeless individuals to take leadership in the following activities:

- a. Learn gourmet cooking from a master chef, building job skills
- b. Launch a summer soccer team
- c. Coax middle-American churchgoers to spend a day penniless in the inner city—and ask the homeless for help getting around.
- d. Envision a men’s choir
- e. Express their voices and experiences in a creative writing group, led by a professional writer
- f. Engage people of faith in JOIN’s community garden
- g. Learn to knit
- h. Think about puppetry, glass-making, and a food cooperative, drawing from the strengths of the city’s diverse faith communities

i. NCI recently received a \$7000 Nike employee grant to launch fitness and exercise programs for the homeless. For more information about the New City Initiative, visit their Facebook page at: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-New-City-Initiative/120772721269246>

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE IDEAS SUGGESTED BY THIS POSTER PRESENTATION:

Website resources (academic syllabi, community resource sites, and extensive bibliographies) available at: www.povertystudies.org

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