Charity, Church, and Change:
A Review of Christianity, Social Change, and Homelessness in the Inland Empire

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Acknowledgements

I have spent this past semester interning with a program called Harvest and Deliver in the Inland Empire, CA. I have also been involved in a program through my school, Pitzer College, called the Ontario program in which I have learned about countless social justice issues, qualitative research methods, and community organizing. I would like to acknowledge and thank all of the amazing people who I have spent time with this semester.

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Epilogue
Hidden under his raincoat, Manuel* peeks out at us as Marissa Friedman* and I walk towards the building that he nervously rests against. He holds his bright red raincoat in front of his face and slowly peers over it, then quickly pulls it back over his head. He does this a few times until we make our way over to him. Manuel is homeless, and Marissa, a local activist and restaurant owner in the community, brings him food and chats with him a couple times a week. Manuel looks at us with worn eyes, as Marissa returns this same gaze. She asks him why he is hiding. He points across the park towards the other homeless guys, and replies that he has had it up to here with them, motioning to his neck.

Observing their interaction, I watch as Manuel begins to explain to Marissa how difficult of a time he is having. Marissa kindly reminds him that if he gets clean then he can come and live in the top floor of her restaurant.

The tears well up in his green eyes as he looks at her: “I can’t, it’s too hard,” He looks my way. “I don’t deserve her,” and points toward Marissa. “She is too good,” he continues. I hold back my own tears.

I notice a full backpack by Manuel’s feet (donated by Marissa), and wonder what it could hold. I nod, “that is a big backpack you’ve got there.” Manuel’s eyes quickly dart towards the ground in embarrassment, away from me, and away from the backpack. I did not mean to offend or upset him. Marissa notices our discomfort and encourages Manuel to tell me what is in the backpack. Shyly, he looks up at me with a small smile and says “seven bibles and rocks.”

“Why on earth?” I think, as Marissa asked him to tell me why.

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1 Interaction with Manuel
“That is what I deserve,” he mumbles. He repeats this a couple times, almost as if he is now talking to himself.

As we say goodbye and walk away from Manuel, I can’t help but think that we are doing just that: walking away, and yet it’s not even clear to me what it is we are walking away from. Do the rocks mean Manuel thinks he should be punished? Did society, his parents, homelessness or the Bible contribute to that message, or are these things his saving grace? Immediately it was clear that there exists a delicate web of issues for someone like Manuel and the thousands of others like him- charity, self-esteem, drugs, homelessness, religion, education, faith, hope, hunger, patience, aid programs, housing – each person carrying their own unique web of issues and circumstances, and yet I know they will not each get their own set of special responses.

Where to begin in figuring how to help? For me, the journey of understanding got off the ground through my semester’s work with Harvest and Deliver, a non-profit that works to provide fresh fruit for those in need. The work and what I observed and learned along the way led me to question the intersection of Christianity, charity, and homelessness in the Inland Empire.

Introduction

For the past few months, I have interned with the organization Harvest and Deliver. This program was started by Melanie Parsons* in Upland, CA. The goal of the program is to pick fruit from community members in and around Upland and to deliver this fruit to various food banks and churches that distribute food to the homeless, or food insecure communities in the Inland Empire. Melanie began this program a few years ago
and has been successful in delivering hundreds of pounds of fruit to different organizations on a weekly basis. This program is important because low-income or homeless people rarely have access to fresh, healthy food in their diets. Harvest and Deliver provides citrus fruit, pomegranates, avocados, and other fresh food, and in doing so helps to improve the diet and nutrition of many families in the Inland Empire.

As part of this internship I cooked for and fed the homeless with Karen Merkely. We cooked at St. Ambrose church and then headed over to Pomona to feed 70-100 people on a bi-weekly basis. Through this experience I have spent time with homeless people and have thought deeply about homelessness on global, national, and local levels. I have also spent time with Marissa Friedman (as mentioned in the story), who is heavily involved in the homeless community, and has helped me form my ideas around charity and change.

Christianity, charity, and homelessness are three components that I witnessed intertwine in fascinating ways. I have spent the vast majority of my time at churches with people of the Christian faith, which has given me a window into Christianity rather than religion as a whole. My data doesn’t support an understanding of the relationship of other types of religions to homelessness or charity, as I have not heavily interacted with any faith except Christianity this semester.

This essay will review my methodologies used throughout the semester, examine the literature already written on this subject, draw conclusions about the themes that I have found in the literature, and identify any gaps that exist. Afterward, I will present an analysis of my findings. This will include sections on: the relationship between religion and charity; the effectiveness of religious groups versus the government; the efficacy of
charity and change. The study will use homelessness as an example that is applicable to each of these topics.

Methodologies

Throughout this semester I have done my research through participant observation and secondary research. Towards the end of the semester, once I had gotten to know the community well, I set up interviews with four different people. These interviews helped inform me about my research even more. I met each interviewee at her place of work, and conducted a recorded session which lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour and a half. The interviews educated me about the needs of each community, and what they think and care about. Each person gave me consent for the interview, either verbally or through a signed ethics contract, however, all of the names have been changed in this essay to protect their privacy.

I tried hard to maintain ethical behavior and work standards for the four months that I have been involved in the community. The most important consideration is to “do no harm”. It is the nature of the semester program, which is challenging because it is such a limited amount of time. However, everyone who I worked with closely knew that I would be leaving in December.

I felt that I had to be very careful about ethics while cooking with Karen and feeding people who are food insecure. I am from a white, upper middle class family. I attend a prestigious university and I was hyperaware of the power dynamics that could be at play. I felt integrated into Karen’s community quite smoothly. However, I was
conscious of my white skin and how other people may perceive me, and my role there. I did not come upon any conflicts or misunderstandings that I was aware of.

One of the challenges that I encountered this semester led me to the main topic of this paper. That is, the debate surrounding charity and change. There are countless issues that people can address, and the most prominent one for me this semester is that of homelessness. Despite the fact that I was working to provide food insecure people fresh food and to cook for them, it felt as if I wasn’t actually changing the root problem: homelessness. I realized that I was involved in a charity model, that may have been making a difference in the lives of several individuals, but it was not creating change on a larger system wide level. This was a very challenging idea for me, which is why I decided to dedicate a section of my paper to this subject.

**A Review of the Literature**

Literature specifically discussing the role of Christianity and charitable organizations in the emergency service industry is limited, but there is comprehensive literature on religion, charity, social change, and homelessness as individual topics. The existing body of literature on homelessness is, of course, vast but is narrower when joined with religion or social change. My intent for this essay is to illuminate the correlation between religion, charity, and homelessness through an examination of the writing that has been done. In dominant literature, there are three main categories that have emerged. The first highlights the relationship between religion and charity, using literature based in sociology, religious studies, and government. The second category focuses on the controversial discussion of the link between charity and social change, using literature
coming out of community studies, sociology, and social change. The third category is that of homelessness. This category discusses history, theories for change, and general information on homelessness, using literature coming out of sociology, history, and economics. There is a large gap in existing literature that addresses where the three categories intersect; only a few articles on the relationship between religion and charity; and little that connects charity, change, and religion in one study.

I. Religion and Charity

The literature on the correlation between religion and charity organizations is multi-dimensional, though I thought it might not be. Although the link between religion and emergency services is often noted, it is just as common to come across authors that focus on the influential nature of religion, and how that is played out for long-term good (particularly in non-profits). Religious studies scholar Tobi Printz offers a background on religious organizations by outlining the various services they provide, and using statistics to observe the involvement that religion has in the service industry. After he presents his data, he poses the question about whether or not religious organizations will provide long-term help. He concludes with questions of lasting impact, but does not

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attempt to answer those questions. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow offers a similar approach, however his understanding is more theoretical. He questions the ability of religious organization to gather citizen involvement. He argues that religion in America is changing, and the “composition”, or the level of involvement and structure, of religion is shifting. This shift disallows much civic involvement through members of religious organizations. Printz and Wuthnow are questioning the role of religion in society. They both insinuate that religion is not the proper tool to lead to change in society. Printz considers it a problem that these organizations are deeply involved in service, whereas Wuthnow focuses on the issue of religion itself, and its changing nature in America.

The converse side of these arguments is outlined as well. Mark Chaves and William Tsitsos emphasize religion’s ability to provide long-term results because of the holistic approach that it takes. Religion has heart, and is interested in the individual well-being of each person. This hypothesis completely negates Printz’s question pertaining to the potential lack of lasting impact in religious service organizations. I Mylek and P Nel offer a similar argument to Chaves and Tsitsos. They claim that religion has the potential to alleviate global poverty because of the nature of the religious community. Their journal article focuses on Christian NGOs. Their thesis is that religious social capital, religious content, and religious cultural power, in conjunction with one another, are what allows religion to have so much power and this, in turn, will eventually lead to social change and reduced poverty rates.

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4 Wuthnow, 335, italics in original.
II. Charity and Social Change

The discussion surrounding charity and social change is vast and works on a spectrum. Author William Powers outlines the debate nicely in his article, *Future Zarahs*. He summarizes two different types of people and/or organizations. There are the cowboys, and then there are the statisticians. The cowboys want to save the day and rescue someone and be the hero. They are all heart and focus on the individuals. The statisticians, on the other hand, focus only on data and the broader issues that need to be addressed. Being a statistician is difficult because it means viewing humans as numbers. It will often feel like heartless work. Powers unenthusiastically sides with the statisticians. Although it is a struggle for Powers to take his heart out of his work, he believes that it is the only way that social change will eventually come about, because continually helping individuals, rather than working from the root of the problem, will feel better to the person helping, but will not solve the deeper issue.

Authors Kivel, Alinsky, and Poppendick make striking hypotheses concerning service and change. They each consider the importance of true social change. However, each one of them, on different levels, theorizes that service can actually be detrimental to the world. Sociologist Janet Poppendick focuses on emergency food programs specifically. Through these emergency food programs, we are contributing to a deteriorating society. Charity and food donation give the false impression that we are helping those in need, when in fact “charity is at once a symptom and a cause of our society’s failure to face up and deal with the erosion of equality.”

is similar to the popular phrase, “You can give a man a fish and he eats for a day; you can teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime.”

Social activist and community organizer Saul Alinsky’s theory is similar, however it is more concentrated on the way in which service is actually provided, and how issues cannot be isolated. He stresses the idea that everything is interrelated and in order to understand one problem, one must view the bigger picture. Similarly, he stresses the importance of real issues such as the necessity for job opportunities and security. He chastises the people who enter into communities to teach arts and crafts or recreational activities. This sort of service is not a true solution to the problem.

Social activist Paul Kivel has a radical and extreme stance on this debate, but perhaps that is what we need to adopt in order to truly bring about change. Kivel creates a pyramid in which he represents the distribution of wealth. This pyramid demonstrates that the ruling class is the top 1%; they are the ones who make policy decisions and essentially run the country. The bottom level of the pyramid belongs to 80% of the people in America who collectively own 9% of the nation’s wealth. Kivel emphasizes the fact that the members of the ruling class are the oppressors, and they have dominated the other 80% so intensely that the bottom class has internalized the ruling classes’ ideas regarding social change. The ruling class keeps the bottom class from uprising (through something Kivel calls a “buffer zone”). “This buffer zone comprises all occupations that carry out the agenda of the ruling class without requiring ruling-class presence or visibility.” However, the ruling class is actually reducing public policy and services

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6 Popular proverb, unknown author.
while creating space for services for immediate help. This creates the illusion of aid and benefit, but does not lead to social change. It simply perpetuates the cycle and keeps the bottom of the pyramid from moving upward or from creating change.

Most of the literature on change and charity emphasizes—to different extremes—the fact that service/charity work does not offer a way out of large societal problems. The solutions outlined generally point towards bringing people together for a bottom up approach,\(^8\) or a “Peoples Organization.”\(^9\) The “fix” that resounds throughout many of these articles and books is essentially for people to band together with a common interest in fighting societal problems from the root of the problem.

### III. Homelessness

The literature on homelessness is vast, however for this research is generally organized into two sections. The first section is the general history, background, causes and statistics on homelessness. The second section offers and potential solutions to homelessness, or offers an outline of what works versus what does not create change.

Authors Ernest P. Todd, Mary Ellen Hombs, and Brendan O’Flaherty provide basic explanations for homelessness. Sociologist Ernest Todd gives his readers a historical understanding of homelessness, and then outlines how many issues regarding homelessness are completely ignored by our government and by our media. Many people turn a blind eye to this issue. Mary Ellen Hombs, director of the U.S. Interagency on Homelessness, provides the most basic understanding of the issue in her book *American Homelessness: A Reference Handbook*. This book is simply a guide for basic facts

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\(^8\) Kivel

around homelessness, giving the reader an adequate understanding of this topic. Economics professor at Columbia University, Brendan O’Flaherty, gives his readers an economic understanding of the causes of homelessness. He provides a basic background just as Hombs and Todd do, however his economic lens illuminates a new outlook on the origins of homelessness. His book was one of the first to view homelessness as having primarily economic causes.

Authors Joel Blau, Charles Kroloff, Doug Benson, Martha Burt, Carol Pearson, and Elizabeth Montgomery offer potential solutions to homelessness. Authors Martha Burt, Carol Pearson, and Elizabeth Montgomery propose a preventative strategy to homelessness. Although they believe that these are tricky monetarily, they believe that they are the most effective programs. Sociologist Joel Blau interprets the deeper, systemic causes of homelessness, attributing it to lack of state and federal level programs. He believes that we need work on these governmental programs, and that is how we will improve homelessness. Doug Benson and Charles Kroloff both present religion as a potential solution. Benson discusses the practices that religious organizations use in order to help cope with homeless situations, describing them as the most effective. Charles Kroloff offers a similar solution with a twist, saying that joining all religious groups to work together with the public sector has the potential to make the biggest difference and to alleviate homelessness.

IV. Gaps in the Literature and Overall Conclusions

While researching, I found limited information pertaining to the correlation between religion and charity, while simultaneously finding countless articles and books on the relationship between charity and change. I did not find anything substantial that
tied religion into this mixture. Finally, although there are many critiques regarding emergency-service programs, there are few that mention the effects that emergency-service programs have directly on the homeless population. My intent for my research paper is to explore the links between charity, Christianity, and emergency services provided for the homeless and food insecure by finding connections and building bridges between some of the hypotheses outlined above.

Analyses

I. Christianity and Charitable Giving

Repeatedly throughout the semester, I heard various people with whom I was working say: “what would Jesus do?” I heard it multiple times weekly. Although my internship, at the simplest level, had to do with picking fruit for the food insecure and the homeless, I ended up having a plethora of interactions with religious based services on a day-to-day basis. Why is that? Is it because of my location, the Inland Empire? The religious demographic here is in fact only about 2% higher than the national average.

So what could explain the ubiquity of religion? Working with a non-denominational, charitable organization, what is it that allowed me to be so deeply intertwined with religion? My argument is that Christianity and charity are inherently linked. I say this for three reasons: first, the language of the Bible and the Christian faiths contributes to this linkage. In fact the “golden rule,” a thread which runs through all religions, springs from the idea of reciprocity: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Second,

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the community engagement aspect plays a large role in Christianity, as well as charity. Finally, the focus that Christianity puts on individual improvement plays a key role in charitable giving.

One of the interviews I conducted was with a woman named Cindy*. She is employed at Hope Inland Valley Partners, working to provide food and transitional housing for people in need, based in Pomona but with food donation sites across the Inland Empire. They have a council of churches that work together, that make up this faith-based program. When asked about the role that religion plays in her work, she responded by saying, “I think churches and faith communities have a big role—it’s built in the DNA—part of what you do is go out and help your neighbor”. She phrased it perfectly. It truly is the DNA of Christianity. To “love thy neighbor” is one of the most fundamental Christian concepts and practices. Love others no matter who they are. This passage expresses the importance of caring for others, which directly relates to charity because charity allows people to help individuals in need. It allows volunteers to aid individual’s immediate problems and to essentially take care of them. Christians strive to care for those in need, because they want to follow Jesus’ teaching. As the executive director of the GAP (God Always Provides) food bank, Pamela, put it: “We are here to give you food, in the name of Jesus certainly; that’s who I give the glory to.” In order to follow the Lord properly, one must be giving and this often presents itself in a charitable fashion.

This connection is further expressed in the Book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Torah. Although not directly used in Christian churches, most Christians recognize

11 Bible, Matthew: 26, 39.
the Torah as “the word of God” and follow many of its teachings. One important passage is as follows:

In case some one of your brothers becomes poor among you in one of your cities, in your land that your God is giving you, you must not harden your heart or be closefisted toward your poor brother. For you should generously open your hand to him and by all means lend him on pledge as much as he needs, which he is in want of... You should by all means give to him, and your heart should not be stingy in your giving to him, because on this account your God will bless you in every deed of yours and in every undertaking of yours. For someone poor will never cease to be in the midst of the land. That is why I am commanding you, saying, ‘You should generously open up your hand to your afflicted and poor brother in your land.’

It is clear that giving to those less fortunate than yourself is a large part of the Christian faith. Generosity is key. Melanie*, the woman with whom I have been interning and the creator of Harvest and Deliver, summed it up nicely: “Jesus in essence did not judge people; he helped people. He helped people regardless of their profession, regardless of their money.” Helping people, in many Christian minds, is what Jesus did. And it is what he expects his followers to do as well. Thus, a way to strengthen ones own religion, and to demonstrate a person’s faith through action, is to help give to those in need. This giving often presents itself in the “quick” forms of charity because that is an easy and immediate way of helping people. Donating money, or giving a blanket or a meal to those less economically fortunate is used time and again as a way of following the teachings of Jesus.

Christianity and charity are linked not only through the language used, but through the community involvement and engagement that takes place. Because people congregate in churches every Sunday, it is a place where folks meet, exchange friendly words, pray together, and get to know the people around them that they otherwise may

never meet. Church brings people together and gives them a reason (other than following Jesus) to want to contribute to the community. Interactions with their fellow citizens and churchgoers allows people to feel deeply rooted to the people around them. As authors Chaves and Tsitsos put it:

The prevailing image here is of a distinctively religious approach to social services, one that—even when there is no explicit religious content involved—is “relational,” “morally compelling,” and “personable”; provides “love,” “guidance,” and “friendship”; and helps people “transform their lives”.  

They sum up the community feel that Christians often experience. This approach sounds very effective, and seems as if it could contribute to larger social change. However, in my experience this semester, I have been involved with various religious organizations that have all the qualities mentioned by Chaves and Tsitsos, yet the vast majority are charity focused. Charity is far easier to accomplish than social change.

This leads me to my final connection between religion and charity: Christianity puts a large emphasis on personal growth and improvement as long as that personal growth is guided by the moral compass of the church. This is significant for two reasons: First, people try to better themselves personally which allows them to do all that they can do on their own, and this in turn leads to charitable giving. Followers also focus more on what they can do for individuals, rather than for the larger society, and charity is a way to help people personally. What I mean here is that when individuals are in pain, people witness this on a personal level. That connection is what leads people to want to help others grow and improve. This is especially prominent in Christianity due to the weight that it attributes to personal growth.

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13 Chaves and Tsitsos.
The Bible has many rules, laws, and words that followers should abide by. This, in itself, gives individual growth meaning. While reading the Bible, people follow the laws that it presents in order to personally follow Jesus, and to better themselves.

Followers of the Christian faith are taught to abide by the rules:

Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord, your God, will be with you wherever you go.14

This passage not only expresses the importance of following the words of God, but it conveys the emphasis put on individual improvement and personal responsibility as well. My argument is that this highlighting of personal discipline in regards to faith leads people into charity because it is a solid way to develop oneself, while following Christian teachings and helping people. Feeding the homeless, donating money, etc, are all charitable acts, and are generally thought of as “good deeds”. It’s within the rules, as well as a concrete, outward way to constantly “prove” to oneself and one’s community that faith is being taken seriously.

This constant outward demonstration of the discipline of faith and individual growth also plays out in the types of social work that Christian groups participate in. As I mentioned in the review of the literature, Author William Powers outlines two types of aid workers: cowboys and statisticians. Because of the focus on individuals, Christians are generally the cowboys. They want to help immediate problems, because they are connected to the people who are struggling. As Melanie put it, “there are people that are disabled, that can’t do anything, and they’re just dragging themselves on the ground, going to people to be fed…without our help, they’ll die.” Christianity contributes to this

14 Bible, Joshua, 1: 8, 9.
charitable giving because church members are connected to the individuals in their community who are hurting, or in need of help. Christianity uses action as a way for believers to demonstrate faith. Faith through action is something anyone can do, and a more outward statement than analyzing facts and figures while putting those in need on hold, even though the latter might provide a deeper understanding of how to go beyond charity and tackle social issues.

This link between Christianity and charity leads me to my next section about charity and change. Religious organizations frequently utilize charity to better the community, but is it really helping those who need it over a long term and at an in-depth level? Is it creating social change? Could religious organizations be more effective in social change movements?

II. An Unconventional Church versus State Debate

Perhaps religious-based social change organizations are the answer to many of the world’s problems; or at least here in the Inland Empire. The church has an immense impact on the alleviation of homelessness and poverty in the Inland Empire. Compared to the state, churches in the area are making much more of an impact. The problem here is that most programs implemented by the church are charity based, making it difficult to change social problems. Instead, these programs keep the system intact and at times contribute to social problems.

The government can provide necessary help for those in need, and it definitely has the funding to do so. However, there are a few ways in which churches can be much more functional than the state, and perhaps can provide hope for the future. Churches are
not regulated by the state. The state’s allocation of money varies in effectiveness, the state creates a bureaucratic mire of paperwork to accompany social change projects, and it can pull funding at any moment providing general uncertainty. Churches provide potential solutions to these problems if they take their holistic values with them into the community. Author Ruth Gilmore wrote a chapter in *The Revolution Will Not be Funded* that supports alternative programs to non-profits. She writes that non-profits are generally turning away from total change for those who need it (i.e. homeless). She mentions “anti-state state actors”\(^\text{15}\) who are funded by the government, and are generally following along limited state regulations. These organizations/actors are not creating change. The church is a potential way to circumvent government regulations, thus allowing wiggle room, creativity and freedom to act in a way that will lead to change.

In Upland, Marissa has had many difficulties with the government. Upland denies that they have any homeless population, thus making it very difficult to get any money allocated toward homelessness alleviation. As part of Marissa’s work, she feeds a group of homeless people in a nearby park a few times a week. However, because the state says that they don’t have homeless, Marissa has faced many challenges. Once, when she was at the park, a woman called the police, who, upon arrival proceeded to physically chase them out of the park rather than listen to the problems.

Marissa has faith in the churches help. Regarding her idea of creating a transitional housing facility in Upland, she says, “I know the city will resist [my idea], I know they are going to tell me no, but through the church umbrella I will be able to do

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more than as a private citizen…I know that the churches will do it. They will, and better than the city could do it.” This, for now, is just the way it is: the government will more often than not maintain society the way that it is, thus making other organizations or groups more effective when it comes to change.

The church can navigate more quickly and easily without the burden of state or federal regulations or laws. It receives funding from private donors, and can act directly with churchgoers or other community members to help change social problems. Authors Chaves and Tsitsos believe that churches are able to contribute to social change because, they take a “laudable, holistic approach to social services that is assumed to come more naturally to religious organizations than to government agencies or (in some accounts) to secular social service providers.”

Marissa’s current situation provides a great example for the effectiveness of churches and religious groups. She owns a restaurant in Upland, which is set in a house. The food service goes on downstairs, and upstairs there are four bedrooms and two bathrooms. Through initiative of her own and help from the church community, she is using this upstairs as a transitional housing facility. She welcomes homeless people in, as long as they are drug and alcohol free, and as long as they are working. (They can work in her restaurant, or look for other work). Marissa would like to expand this model and buy a bigger house, or a complex, where homeless people can move through a program and can be easily integrated in the community. She does not want this house to be stigmatized, she simply wants the inhabitants to be neighbors; to be thought of like

16 Chaves and Tsitsos.
anyone else. Marissa seems sure that if she presented this idea to the Upland government, that they would knock it down in one second. (Perhaps denying that they have a homeless population is a large part of that problem).

John McKnight speaks to this in his book *The Careless Society, A Community and Its Counterfeits*, where he discusses the impact that community-based solutions are the most effective. He refutes the ever-common “services” that exist:

> Because the gross national product is the sum of goods and services produced each year, many policy experts have come to believe that the well-being of our society increasingly depends upon the amount of commodities called services that are produced by institutions and used by consumers.  

However, these “services” that McKnight speaks of can actually be detrimental. A local, community-based approach like Molly’s is much more effective because when the people creating change are a part of the community themselves, they are aware of the best approach, and are also personally connected to and affected by the results and outcomes of change.

Although Marissa’s model is currently charity based (she is giving up a room in her upstairs), there are two important things to note: the first is her commitment to her community, and the second is that she has an end result in mind: to end homelessness in the Inland Empire. Marissa is a rare example of a person who is deeply committed to both charity AND social change and is working the two alongside each other, trying to get at social change through the charity vehicle. Meaning, she is giving and providing in a charity based-fashion, while keeping a broad goal in mind, which is why she is so effective. The church community is a powerful one and their commitment to helping

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others is unwavering. Thus, if their intentions are solid, and they have leaders that can take them beyond a charity-only-model, then they could potentially create positive and powerful change. I do not mean to say that the Christian church or other religious groups should be the only actor involved in social change. Rather, that they have immense power in our society, and if they simply shifted their goals slightly, then they could bring about true change that could inspire others as well as work in conjunction with other change actors. On a similar note, it is important that every actor (religious and not) need be self-critical when attempting to better a community. Oftentimes organizations do not recognize the pitfalls of their charitable programs. If every group were self-critical, and recognized and deeply thought about what impact they were making, our world would be much more productive.

III. Charity and Change

“We need to do more than just say ‘come in, and we’ll drop a burrito in your mouth.’ Its more than that, its bigger than that” –Marissa*

This semester, and throughout my sociology classes in college, I have learned about deep-rooted systemic issues, (homelessness, for example). However, considering solutions to these problems can be extremely overwhelming. In general, the approaches to solving these problems are either charity-based or change-based (as discussed thoroughly in the review of the literature). Although both can be effective, I believe that the change model is the true answer to solving and revolutionizing these challenges. However, the charity model can sometimes be effective as well, as long as the end/final goal is kept in mind. For example, rather than the end goal being, “to feed 100 homeless people today”, rather, it would be “to end hunger for the homeless”, or “to end
homelessness”. As long as these broader goals are kept in mind, then people’s actions will be done with more intention, and create a longer-lasting impact. With deep intention and mindfulness, more volunteers and charity-workers will better understand the detriment that charity can cause, and may naturally turn to social-change work. Workers can contribute to the larger solution as well if they are educated with more of a change mindset, rather than just a charity mindset. Their own goals or levels of participation or intent might change in even subtle ways that alter the larger outcomes.

Throughout this semester I have been conflicted internally, and I suppose, outwardly as well, about this issue of charity and change. I feel personally connected to my internship with Harvest and Deliver, although it is charity based. I enjoy picking fruit with Melanie. I adore the people that I meet at the GAP food bank, especially the executive director, Polly*. I love cooking with Karen* and her volunteers at St. Ambrose church, and then heading over to Pomona to feed about 100 homeless on a bi-weekly basis. Working with this charitable community has been self-rewarding, fulfilling, and fun. However, on the converse side of that, I have been learning all semester about social change, and that to truly transform our society, our solutions must be bigger than a simple meal or a blanket. Are those things truly making an impact? Or are they simply pushing the problem further along? At times, I feel as connected to the change debate as author Paul Kivel (mentioned in the review of the literature). He speaks of the affluent top oppressing the majority; they have socialized us to believe that we are doing the right thing by involving ourselves in charity work, when in fact it is simply perpetuating the cycle of divided wealth. Or as is similarly outlined in the book, Notes from Nowhere, We are Everywhere:
Built to keep all the ordinary people of the world out of the way, out of sight, far from the
decision-makers and at mercy of their policies…for in a world entranced by profit, public
space is privatized, land fenced off, seeds, medicines, and genes patented, water metered,
and democracy turned into purchasing power. The fences are also inside us. Interior
borders run through our atomized minds and hearts, telling us we should look out only for
ourselves, that we are alone.\(^{18}\)

This view strongly advocates for change, or revolution. It advocates for
movements such as Occupy Wall Street. I easily agree with these viewpoints, and it is
important to view these models for change as necessary and important. However, there
are starving people. There are people who will die if they do not get fed, or do not have a
place to sleep, or a blanket to sleep with, when it is wintertime. This is where the charity
model plays an important role. People cannot simply be left to die. As Marissa puts it,
“human beings are not disposable.” You cannot simply stop helping those in need. The
important thing to note is that the charity and change models are on a continuum. It is not
necessarily one or the other. Rather, it is fighting for change; and if charity is necessary,
then simply keeping the end result in mind will hopefully lead people to make necessary
changes to their programs. To keep the continuum model alive, education needs to take
place at all levels. As people learn and understand more – about how to take care of
themselves, about how to teach others meaningful skills, about how to think more deeply
for solutions – the continuum experiences more movement and flexibility with more blur
between charity and social change as well as more give and take between the two. All
levels, speeds, and attempts at change are necessary. This continuum simply presents
many potential solutions to problems. As long as each program or organization is being
self-critical then this continuum will progress in a positive direction, due to the fact that
they are always trying to improve and accomplish their goals.

\(^{18}\) The Revolution will not be funded, 20.
Once again, Marissa’s model is admirable. She feeds the homeless, but also gives them a transitional housing facility as an option. She demands something back from them and tries to educate as she goes along, just as she had told Manuel that he can’t move into her housing until he is “clean.” In holding people responsible for themselves, they learn to move away from charity on their own. Although this is not easy, it is a necessary form of help. Change is not easy! In our interview, Marissa couldn’t hold back her tears while speaking about Manuel. Crying, Marissa said, “and no one told me that once you break bread with people, everything changes. And you can’t look at Manuel and say ‘sleep tight!’ and know that you have 4 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, and a kitchen upstairs. How could I do that and say ‘sleep tight’?” Marissa exemplifies the connectedness that many feel, but is still an advocate for social change. She does not want to simply apply “the band-aid” principle and give them food. She is so committed and immersed in this community that she understands that feeding the homeless will potentially only make the situation worse. Which is why she focuses on her community. She knows them, she feeds them, and she offers them a transitional place to stay and re-integrate into “civil society”.

I believe that a main problem in this debate is that people are socialized to believe that charitable acts are truly helping. I hear countless stories of “I went to feed the homeless”, or “I went to a foreign country to do arts and crafts,” and so on. These acts of kindness may or may not truly be so helpful in leading to social change, yet the people who perform them are applauded for their efforts to help better our world. They are applauded without discussion. The problem then becomes the lack of education or forethought about what makes a real difference. If everyone thought more deeply about
the impacts they were making; or if everyone were educated about what “change” truly means, then our world might be more self-critical, and thus more productive.

IV. Homelessness

Homelessness ties charity, change, and religion together into a chaotic package in which the true solution is difficult to find, let alone agree on. I found that many churches are focused on “helping the homeless” because it is a tangible problem that can be worked with.

The problem with homelessness begins with a broad level of analysis. Jennifer Wolch, a social scientist, offers a great understanding of homelessness and allows the reader to see that homelessness is not the individual’s fault. Joel Blau puts it bluntly: “we must discredit a myth…that the homeless are lazy misfits who brought their plight upon themselves”19 (This is a common misconception. In fact, structural and systemic forces are constantly at play. This brings us back, once again, to Manuel’s story. He clearly blamed himself for the position that he is in, and refuses to put blame on anyone else. Marissa noted that all of the guys who live in the park feel the same way as Manuel. They all believe that it is their own fault that they ended up in this challenging situation. Yet there are so many other forces at play that people do not recognize. Upbringing, the oppressive state, the extremely weak economy—the list goes on. This relates to the charity versus change debate in the most basic sense. If the general belief in America is that the homelessness problem is the individual’s fault, then the homeless community

will internalize that. This feeling is self-deprecating and can actually lead to detrimental effects on change, because the homeless population will be so discouraged that they will not want to change. Pamela and Melanie both spoke of the “bottom 20%” (Pamela) of the homeless population who are caught in the system. Pamela put it like this:

Like I said, there is only about 20% that I see abusing the system, the others are here to use it for what the need. And 20% is 20%, but you are going to find that just about anywhere. There are going to be people abusing the system everywhere.

The rhetoric used here, even by people who interact with the homeless on a daily basis, is that these bottom 20% are “abusing the system”. In fact, they are stuck! Because of the lack of change organizations, free drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, and the plethora of charity organizations providing emergency services, this “bottom 20%” actually has a much more difficult time changing.

Religious organizations play a crucial role in the homeless community. They provide immediate help, but rarely offer long-term solutions. Homelessness, poverty, and hunger, in particular are specific foci for many churches. The band-aid approach is not affecting change. The book of Deuteronomy quotes “someone poor will never cease to be in the midst of the land.”20 This viewpoint is troublesome and perhaps contributes to the charity model because it dismisses the idea that poverty, or homelessness, could ever be eradicated. This allows people to implement programs using temporary or emergency help programs while believing that these are what homeless communities need.

However, as mentioned earlier, religious organizations have great potential in providing help. Author Joel F. Handler presents a proverb on the first page of his book:

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20 Glanzman.
“It is not bread the poor need, it is soul; it is not food, it is spirit.” This exemplifies what people need. They do not need short-term solutions, they need faith, soul, and spirit. Religious organizations have the ability and opportunity to provide these things for homeless communities.

Homelessness is a serious problem in America, and it is a cycle that needs to be uprooted and changed. This semester I went on a field trip to the Mercy House for class. This trip opened my eyes to potential solutions, as has Marissa. It was inspiring to hear Gail, the director of The Mercy House, say that their goal was to “eventually end homelessness”, a goal I would have thought was too idealistic to consider just a few months ago. Working with Harvest and Deliver, I have come to recognize the necessity of simple charity for people’s day-to-day survival, while still being frustrated with the fact that a charity-only model perpetuates this cycle of poverty and homelessness.

Homelessness, so multifaceted, challenges us to look at every level of our system with a discerning eye and to consider how non-profit, religious and charitable organizations can work together with government to create change. However, it is a more approachable problem when people understand the root causes, and can thus tackle it at different and deeper levels rather than simply attempting to do a quick fix. Richard Freeman, a Harvard University professor, has called homelessness “a fatigued compassion.” I only hope that we can rekindle the empathy and concern that once existed, in order to uproot this issue.

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22 Quoted in a discussion about O’Flaherty’s book: *Making Room: The Economics of Homelessness*
Conclusion

Enlightening, informative, and frustrating, this semester has provided a background for me to understand the world and to think critically about potential solutions to the vast problems of the world. Although issues such as homelessness are often overwhelming and seemingly limitless, they were not always present and they do not have to be now. I urge every individual and organization to think critically about their position in society, and to consider the actions they take to better their community. We have the tools and the freedom to look at what does work, and what has worked in the past, while creatively brainstorming what might work well in the future. In my dream future, I can imagine private charity organizations working in tandem with churches of all religions and in turn both of those types of organizations working in tandem with the government – federal, state and local. Synergy and teamwork might create the fireworks we need. Together, we all have the power to uproot the hard issues that seem to seep into every crack of society.
Works Cited


