Expectant giving: Handouts are wrong (usually)

by Amy L. Sherman in the February 24, 1999 issue

A few months ago, I knowingly harmed an indigent woman named Jacqueline. She was standing at the end of the exit ramp, holding up the predictable sign: "Homeless. Please Help." I parked the car and doubled back to talk to her. She and her "old man" had come from a city a few hours east, she said. For the last few days they'd been sleeping under a small cluster of leafy trees a stone's throw from the Interstate.

I tried hard to persuade Jacqueline to let me take her to the Salvation Army shelter. I knew its directors and something of its programs and could attest to its safety and cleanliness. Jacqueline was adamantly opposed. In a few minutes I recognized that she wasn't quite all there mentally. Further debate was fruitless. And so I did what I almost never do. I gave Jacqueline a handout.

We got into my car and I drove her to Food Lion. I told her to pick out what she needed and I'd buy. Her desires were modest: a pack of hot dogs, a bottle of Pepsi, canned meat, a loaf of white bread and a tiny bottle of Texas Pete hot sauce. I urged fruit and vegetables on her to no avail. Then we stopped at the Family Dollar store, where she selected a cheap bra and two pairs of underpants. Bug spray from CVS completed our shopping expedition, and I drove her back to her "campsite."

I visited her and her husband there a couple more times over ensuing days, offering him tips on grounds-keeping jobs and continually suggesting they visit the Salvation Army shelter. I guess they've moved on, since I haven't seen them for over a month.

I'm convinced that handouts are basically wrongheaded. A recent book by James L. Payne, *Overcoming Welfare*, makes the case against them particularly well. Handouts, he says, demean recipients by implying that beneficiaries can't meet their own needs. They can enable dysfunctional behavior and can be disincentives to work. By contrast, "expectant giving"-a contribution that demands a constructive response from the supplicant-affirms people's God-given dignity and capacities. It's

a "hand-up," not a handout.

Most Americans favor hand-ups. We don't wish to reward people for irresponsibility or engender dependency among the able-bodied. Ironically, though, most of our social welfare systems (public and private) offer handouts, not hand-ups. Payne offers several explanations for this.

First, hand-up giving requires far more time, thought and personal investment than sympathetic (handout) giving. It's much easier to toss the homeless a few dollars than to build a relationship with them can address the root causes of their condition. Second, donors (especially religiously motivated ones) sometimes misapply maxims about giving, like the story of the Good Samaritan. As Payne explains, "Our homilies and parables are right to encourage our generosity towards strangers in unexpected situations. But these teachings don't tell us how to act if we are asked to give a second time." Yet we often use the Good Samaritan example to justify programs of repeated giving (like Food Stamps). Third, governments tend inevitably to provide sympathetic, rather than expectant, giving. Government bureaucracies are distant from individual poor families and cannot properly assess their particular needs or respond flexibly-two requirements of expectant giving. Moreover, bureaucracies are loathe to make the kind of judgments expectant giving demands. They tend to operate explicitly on the principle that no lifestyle is superior to another.

For all these reasons, Payne laments, we keep giving indiscriminately and thoughtlessly, to the detriment of the poor. And our affluence provides us the means to keep on killing with kindness. Payne's words are cutting, but generally true: "The routinized giving of material assistance to strangers must be seen as a vice, not as a praiseworthy activity."

The quid pro quo of expectant giving sounds off-putting to religiously attuned ears. But hard-working, devout charity workers in the 19th century practiced it regularly. Consider Octavia Hill, who lived among the poor in the low-income apartment complexes she managed in London. Hill refused any salary for this work and poured her heart and soul into the children and adults she mentored for four decades. Her essays on her experiences are saturated with the delight she felt in this work, the love she gave and received, and the obvious respect she had for others' dignity. Her writings also make crystal clear her devotion to tough love and accountability and her unwillingness to engage in indiscriminate charity that engendered dependency. She challenged donors to consider whether their giving was not only benevolent in

its intent but also beneficient in its long-term result. How well do our church-based soup kitchens live up to this?

I consider Octavia Hill a mentor and insist that the ministry I direct in a low-income urban neighborhood operate on the principles of expectant giving. Nevertheless, I gave Jacqueline a handout. Why?

Shortly before meeting Jacqueline I had conducted a lengthy interview with Felicia, a woman in our job training program. I learned that my church had been involved with Felicia for several years prior to her enrollment in our program. The church had paid her bills on occasion and linked her with a mentor. After several months, Felicia abandoned that relationship and tried again to make her own way. That flopped, and Felicia found herself facing a turn-off notice from the electric company because of unpaid bills.

Knowing nowhere else to turn, she called our church and received financial aid. Felicia was shown mercy-undeserved, unearned grace-in her time of need. By the work of God's Spirit, she apprehended this, and it made her both humble and appreciative. Shortly after, Felicia requested to be matched with a new mentor-a relationship that still continues two years later. With that mentor's help, Felicia secured her GED, moved out of public housing, and successfully completed our job training program. She is currently employed in a medical clinic.

As I mulled over Felicia's story, I realized that, had I been in charge of the church's benevolence fund at the time, I would have vetoed the idea of helping her out of her jam with the electric company. I'd have argued that saying no was necessary, that assistance would be merely a handout likely to enable Felicia to continue in her self-destructive habits. Better to have her feel the consequences of her behavior, I would have argued, and perhaps be jolted by them onto a healthier course.

I was forced to admit that the church's demonstration of mercy was crucial to the remarkable progress Felicia has made in the past three years. A "tough love" refusal back then might have pushed her to better behavior, but it might also have turned her off completely to Christianity. The gospel's claim to offer "undeserved favor to sinners" has become a more plausible idea to Felicia, for she can remember when the congregation showed her such mercy.

Felicia's testimony filled my thoughts as I stood alongside Interstate 64, looking into Jacqueline's weather-beaten and lined face. I didn't have enough information to

judge her deserts. I didn't want to enable her dysfunctional lifestyle, yet I was singularly unable to convince her of a better path. Her personal fear of shelters, and her obvious mental limits, prevented rational discussion. And my refusal to help her would not leave her in circumstances that would force her to avail herself of the Salvation Army. After all, she and her "old man" had been managing several days without me. So I "helped" her-fully aware that perhaps at some level I was also hurting her. The ethical calculus in this circumstance was complicated: the aid and friendliness I showed her for a few days, I pray, offered her some small touch of God's mercy. She knew I was a Christian, for we talked of it and of the things of Christ.

Additionally, in my exchange with Jacqueline, I felt God was working on me. As we waited in the grocery store check-out line, I recalled the words "Give to the one who asks from you" (Matt. 5:42). As I killed time in the Family Dollar, Michael Card's lyrics echoed in my head:

> In His distressing disguise,
> He waits for us to surmise
> That when we take care of the poorest of them;
> We've really done it to Him.

I don't intend to give any more handouts soon. I've seen too often the harm they do and heard too many sad stories from other front-lines practitioners whose efforts to transform people's lives are hampered by naïve donors practicing "random acts of kindness." I hope all compassionate people will read Payne's book on expectant giving. But I also pray that we'll be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's prompting and allow some space for grace.