Sweet Charity, by Janet Poppendieck

reviewed by Leon Howell in the March 3, 1999 issue

By Janet Poppendieck, Sweet Charity: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement. *(Viking, 354 pp.)*

As she pushed her way through fresh snow while walking from her Brooklyn apartment to a soup kitchen, Janet Poppendieck hummed "Good King Wenceslas," a tune from her childhood. The 19th-century hymn honors the tenth-century Bohemian king for his compassion to a "poor man gathering winter fuel." A tribute to charity, it ends, "Ye who now will bless the poor/Shall yourselves find blessing."

Poppendieck, a sociologist who teaches at Manhattan's Hunter College, gathers in this highly readable book a wealth of information about modern charity as reflected in soup kitchens, food pantries, food banks and food rescue programs. To collect her data Poppendieck visited nine states-from Florida to California to Maine to Ohio-and participated in many different programs. She followed up with interviews, especially with providers.

What she found was "an outpouring of compassion, both organized and individual, that would be the envy of most societies in human history." Tens of thousands of emergency food programs, many of them in churches, have grown up to help those in need. They took off in the 1980s and '90s. No adequate data exist, but in New York City, according to one estimate, the number of emergency feeding programs has grown from 30 to more than 1,000 in the past 20 years. Bread for the World, a Christian antihunger movement, estimates that 150,000 kitchens and pantries operate nationally.

Millions of Americans support these programs with contributions of cash, food, time and effort. Poppendieck is impressed and moved by the depth of commitment of so many people in so many places. She found them blessing and being blessed. But her rich experience also has left her with some serious concerns. King Wenceslas was murdered by his brother, Duke Boleslaw, and a group of nobles who opposed his peaceful demeanor toward Bohemia's neighbors and his effort to curb the exploitation of his poorest subjects. But he is remembered for charity, not justice.

Poppendieck quotes Samuel Johnson: "I have found the world kinder than I expected, but less just." She documents kindness, and she worries about the absence of justice. Voluntary care has flowed into a large vacancy. A significant number of people who can't earn enough to feed, house and clothe their families even when they work-Second Harvest, the giant food bank organization, reported in 1995 that almost half of the 26 million people it served were employed-are confronted with weakened government programs. Poppendieck outlines the federal programs-food stamps, school feeding programs, the highly praised WIC (Women, Infants and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program)-that provide a safety net. Poor people have a "right" to food, Congress declared in the '70s. But between 1981 and 1998-the Reagan-through-Clinton years-food programs have been under constant attack. At the same time the gap between the rich and poor has grown dramatically.

"My argument is that this massive charitable endeavor serves to relieve pressure for more fundamental solutions," Poppendieck writes. The proliferation of feeding efforts gives us religious comfort and assuages our guilt. It deceives us into believing that personal charity is an adequate response to social and economic disruptions. It allows government to shirk its duty to promote the common good. Because feeding programs are so demanding, they exhaust those most deeply concerned about poor people and divert them from dealing with the root causes of poverty.

Poppendieck calls for a "powerful social movement" that works to eliminate poverty, to provide jobs that pay a living wage, to build livable housing, to furnish adequate medical care, to make the need for soup kitchens-that terrible echo of the Depression haunting these years of high prosperity-a thing of the past. She argues that "a program or policy that tries only to prevent acute hunger is aiming too low." The kind of effort she wants would produce a society in which the reduction of poverty and inequality would make hunger and homelessness as rare as polio. How to get there remains the question-a question this book, for all its merits, does not adequately engage.