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CONGREGATIONS AND POVERTY RELIEF

PROBLEM: Despite the limited staffing and resources of congregations, people in need turn to them for social services.

SOLUTION: According to their missions and resources, congregations assist those in need directly or by referring them to helping agencies.

Rev. Billy Hall, the minister of visitation and outreach at Light of the World Christian Church, handles all requests that the church receives for material help. As one of the city's largest churches, situated amidst relatively poor neighborhoods, Light of the World receives numerous requests each year. By late January 2000 of this year, Rev. Billy Hall had received pleas for food and money from about 100 people.

Hall spends five hours a day, three days a week, responding to these requests. He attempts to return calls promptly; but, since most of the people he responds to do not have an answering machine, he often ends up calling them several times.

"What I've found is that people appreciate, almost more than the assistance, just hearing back from you," Hall explained. "The church is the hope for most people. They may not get help from their relatives, or from the multi-service centers, or from the government agencies. But they believe that the church will always be able to help. So I'll usually persevere, even though I might reach them three weeks after they've called."

Light of the World is unusual for the amount of requests it receives and because it has a staff member to address them. But virtually every congregation in the city struggles with the same challenge: how to divide limited resources among the large number of people who seek help.

The issue is complicated by the fact that congregations see their mission primarily as offering spiritual sustenance. They rarely have the staff or resources to provide significant material aid. Yet, as Hall noted, congregations are one place that people turn to in times of desperation.

"People typically end up here after they've alienated family and friends and have been cast out from other connections," says Rev. Fred Milligan, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church. "They've tapped out all their other resources."

Consequently, congregations often feel trapped. They want to show compassion, but fear that they are perpetuating a cycle of dependency or simply being used. And the material aid they supply seems like a short-term solution at best. "The unfortunate part about it is that when folks come in, we're not really set up to work with them," Chester Mayflower, pastor of Speedway United Methodist Church, observes. "It's just a bandage." Yet helping people address fundamental issues would require a commitment of time, energy, and money that seems unrealistic.

Probably no congregation is entirely satisfied with its approach to helping the needy. Some wish they could do more; others believe they have done too much. Almost all struggle to balance compassion with wisdom.

FOUR RESPONSES

The following profiles capture some of the diversity in congregational poverty relief efforts. There is probably no perfect model or right answer—only various strategies, some more systematic than others. Each involves tradeoffs.

Light of the World Christian Church

Like most congregations, Light of the World does not give cash to individuals who seek its help. Instead, Rev. Hall may write a check to the individual's utility company or landlord. The cap on cash assistance is usually \$100, though the amount given is usually much less. Hall decides each case individually, depending on the circumstances and the money available to him at the time.

Light of the World tracks the aid that it gives. Hall requires people to fill out a brief form stating their personal information, which he keeps on file. He usually limits financial help to once a year, though that policy is flexible—particularly if the help is given to a member of the church (about five percent of those he serves, by Hall's estimate).

Hall directs people needing food to the church's food pantry, which is open three days a week. The limit on food assistance is typically once a month.

Hall asks people who request help whether they would like a visit from a church member; almost invariably, they assent to the offer. Members of one of the church's visitation teams then follow up with a visit. Hall believes this aspect of the work is at least as important as the material help, and he does not shy away from the fact that its explicit purpose is evangelization.

"We see this as a ministry to people, not just as a social service operation," he says. "We see it as an outreach to try to help people understand that they need to form a relationship with God. We believe that as a person grows with God, God will meet them at their point of need and provide for them, and they will one day come to be able to provide for themselves. We want to touch the lives of these people, and it's a great opportunity for us to witness to them and win souls."

Central Christian Church

Central Christian's prominence in the history of Indianapolis is not obvious from the size of its current membership. It is a congregation of about 100 people, but at one time it had many times that number and its membership list included many of the city's notable citizens. Founded in 1833 and located downtown, it was the city's first Christian (Disciples of Christ) congregation, and it has a long history of activism and outreach. In fact, a mission that Central founded in 1866 to serve the African-American population eventually became Light of the World Christian Church.

Central Christian's pastor, Rev. Mary Alice Mulligan, handles all requests for help that the church receives. These are numerous, because Central is one of the city's most visible and accessible churches.

Mulligan used to handle each request as it came in but found that she got little else done. Now she sets aside an hour each afternoon, four days a week, to address the three or four requests for help that come in each day. Anyone who needs help is asked to stop by the church during that hour. This process makes the church's relief efforts more efficient, yet Mulligan still talks with each person separately and privately.

If people need groceries, Mulligan can offer them the assistance of Central's food pantry. It is normally open for one hour the last Saturday of each month, but provisions are also set aside for emergency cases. Central also has a relationship with a local café; if someone needs a meal immediately, Mulligan can direct him or her there with a voucher. If people need clothing, Mulligan takes them to Central's thrift shop, which doubles as a clothes pantry. The church normally sells the items in the shop, but people in need can have one free outfit

every three months.

Mulligan can offer up to \$20 of help with utilities, rent, or gas—never in cash but in the form of a check written to the creditor. As with Light of the World—and all the congregations featured here, in fact—financial help is limited to once a year, while the food pantry is available once a month. To receive help, a person must have the relevant invoice and some form of identification.

Mulligan said that she sees Central's relief efforts as a continuation of the church's tradition of outreach to the community. For her, it is not so much a way to evangelize as a way to connect with people. Mulligan says that several people who came to the church seeking help now attend regularly. "We always extend an invitation for folks to attend worship and be part of who we are here. I'm not interested in adding numbers for the sake of numbers; but so often, people on the street live very isolated, desperate lives. The church has something important to offer them—not just food and clothing and rent assistance, but relationships with other people and with God."

Emerson Avenue Baptist Church/ICAN

The Irvington Churches Advocacy Network (ICAN), a cooperative effort sponsored by 10 churches on the near east side, operates out of Emerson Avenue Baptist Church. The churches started ICAN five years ago after a similar, city-wide alliance folded.

ICAN centralizes relief efforts, so that pastors of the cooperating churches can direct requests for assistance to Emerson Avenue Baptist. ICAN employs a part-time staff member devoted exclusively to poverty relief. Barbara Ingalls has served in that role since ICAN's founding. Ingalls, who is also Emerson Avenue's minister of Christian education, normally works at ICAN from 9 a.m. to noon three days a week. She is assisted by another paid, part-time person and two volunteers.

In 1999, ICAN served about 220 people. That number might seem low, considering that Irvington is close to several poor neighborhoods, but serving people at ICAN is more complicated than simply writing them a check or buying them gas. Ingalls typically spends about two hours with those who seek help. They fill out an assessment form, giving information about their income and expenses, and then Ingalls discusses it with them.

Ingalls is not a social work professional. She tries to help with immediate needs, and then refers people to the places where they can get the help that she cannot provide. She also attempts to schedule them for a follow-up visit. ICAN does not hand out cash; the limit on rent and other subsidies is left to Ingalls' discretion, though budget limitations prevent her from giving substantial amounts.

Congregation-supported, cooperative ventures such as ICAN are rare. What makes one possible in Irvington, Ingalls said, is that it is a closely knit neighborhood. Bridging theological differences has not been a problem: ICAN was conceived as a poverty relief effort, not an evangelization tool. If people seem interested in attending church, Ingalls gives them a list of all the local congregations.

Ingalls said that she thinks of her work with ICAN as "putting faith into action. I know what it means to have someone listen to you," she said. "I suppose that's what keeps me going—knowing that people really need to know that someone cares. Seeing people grow and become what God intended them to be is important to me, because I know that it can be done. I know that we can change our lives and become better people. Sometimes it takes just a word. Some small thing you say might encourage a person to go on."

John Knox Presbyterian

John Knox Presbyterian Church, in the solidly middle-class town of Speedway on Indianapolis's west side, is far from the city's worst pockets of poverty. But I-465 passes nearby, making the church accessible to anyone who has a car.

In the past, people drove from the city's east side just to get help with gas money, according to Rev. Mark Merrill, associate pastor of John Knox. As a result, the church began restricting its relief efforts to six zip codes in the Speedway area several years ago.

Merrill and the church's head pastor, Rev. Roger Dean, take turns at handling the requests for help. John Knox has a budget of \$150 for poverty relief per month, with a limit of \$25 per individual. As with most congregations, this help is given in the form of a check to creditors, not in cash. Occasionally, the church goes over its per-person limit—for example, when a person needs a motel room. Once the church has distributed its \$150 for the month—typically after helping six people—it turns away any further requests, asking people to return at the beginning of the next month.

In part, this policy was implemented so that the church could spread its relief efforts over the entire year. When there was an annual but not a monthly limit, the church would sometimes use all its budgeted funds by the middle of the year. Under the current system, it sometimes runs out of funds before the end of the month—sometimes very early in the month, as it did this January. But relief funds are available again in a matter of days or weeks.

John Knox does not have a food pantry, and the pastors rarely take anyone to a local grocery to shop for \$25 worth of groceries. But they can refer people to The Sharing Place, a nearby thrift store that provides people with free food and clothing when they are referred by a church. (John Knox also collects donations to help The Sharing Place stock its shelves.)

In some cases, John Knox can tap the resources of the Speedway Ministerial Association's "transient fund," designed to help people from outside Indiana who are passing through town and need money for gas or a motel room. The Association has not yet started a common fund dedicated to local needs, such as Irvington's ICAN, but Speedway's pastors generally agree on the need for one.

"I think we're beginning to see that there are people who live on the edge of society on this side of town who need a lot more help than what we're able to give working independently," said Rev. Chester Mayflower, president of the Speedway Ministerial Association. "We're not equipped or trained to help people with more than just a bandage. We have to develop ministries to break the cycles of poverty, of hopelessness, of family abuse."

A MATTER OF TIME

For many congregations, a particularly frustrating aspect of poverty relief is the time it takes. If they give people assistance without verifying their stories, they often feel as if they've been swindled. But if they take the time to thoroughly investigate every story, they can end up spending their time on nothing but poverty relief.

Some congregations have observed that giving freely of their time—not just of their money or food—seems to actually decrease the number of requests they receive.

"We enter into conversation with each person, and try to ask natural questions about their situation: How have you ended up coming to a church to find assistance? Do you have family in town? Are you from here?" said Fred Milligan, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, who typically spends half an hour every day dealing with requests for help. "What I find is that people who are trying to run a scam become very impatient with my willingness to take time and have a genuine conversation with them. If they're coming in and just trying to lay a guilt trip on me, to squeeze five dollars out of me, they're going to be very uncomfortable having a real conversation."

Of course, there are alternatives to making substantial time or financial investments. If they can do nothing else, most congregations can at least serve as an information resource, connecting people to the agencies and organizations that are equipped to help them. Though not always well known, such organizations provide the same kinds of services that congregations often feel obligated to take upon themselves.

The Sharing Place, with branches on the east and west sides of the city, is one example. Though it is an agency of Lutheran Child and Family Services, it serves people referred by any church. The west branch alone helped more than 5,000 people with food and clothing in 1999. Elaine Adams, manager of The Sharing Place West, said the agency welcomes more referrals from congregations.

The Crisis Office of Catholic Social Services, located a few blocks north of downtown, serves people from all over the city—about 8,000 in 1999—with no restriction on where they must live and no appointment required. It offers up to \$25 in financial assistance, a food pantry, and a clothes pantry.

The Crisis Office can also provide identification cards on site—a seemingly minor service that is crucially important to people trying to obtain social services. The Office also serves as an advocate. If it cannot provide enough help to keep a person's utilities from being shut off, for example, it will attempt to tap the resources of other local organizations. Or one of the workers—there are two paid staffers and 25 volunteers—will contact the utility companies and attempt to set up payment schedules.

The Salvation Army is also a resource for congregations, though many are not aware of the full range of its activities. The Army has three sites in Indianapolis that distribute federal funds designated to help people with rent and utility payments—up to \$300 for rent and \$150 for utilities; these sites also have food pantries.

KEEPING THE FAITH

While congregations are frustrated that their relief efforts often seem ineffective, they seem prepared to persevere. Their efforts are rooted in fundamental religious principles that are not easily set aside because of discouraging results.

The Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation's Rabbi Eric Bram, for example, described that congregation's piecemeal poverty relief efforts as "something that we're not really proud of" and "not something that we want to be in the business of, necessarily, because there is a lot of difficulty in it. You have people who are not being helped at all by being given a handout. And we're not in a position to provide training for them or housing for them—we're not a social service agency."

But Bram also says that making an effort at such charity is "firmly rooted in ancient teachings." The IHC gets a handful of requests for help each month but does not have a set policy. Generally, Bram tries to help people "modestly, if we have the resources to do so."

"Creating a society that is increasing in its holiness is what people of faith are called to do, and a small act of simply being kind to someone, or offering hospitality or support, falls under that rubric in the widest sense," Bram says. "It is a dilemma for us, because we have a vision of how things should be—that people shouldn't need to come to us for this. But we live in a very broken world, and each step we take to try to fix it is a step. Probably the best way to respond is to advocate economic justice and a society where there's opportunity for everyone. To do this without doing that is kind of empty."

Rabbi Arnold Bienstock of Shaarey Tefilla Hebrew Congregation noted that, within Judaism, "it is considered an imperative—a moral, ethical imperative—to give. Not that it's nice, or kind, but that it's an imperative."

The Jewish community has developed a systematic, national philanthropic system that Jews contribute to impressively. The Judaic imperative about giving can be fulfilled by supporting that system, so giving to individuals is a gray area. Bienstock typically helps people with whatever resources are at hand, but "there's a back and forth tension there," he says. "Are you really helping an individual by giving them a handout?" On the other hand, writing a check to an organization located far away "doesn't touch you in the way that knowing someone in poverty does."

For Christians, Jesus' example is universally cited as the inspiration—and source of obligation—for their poverty-relief efforts. Mathew 25:35 is frequently cited: "For I was hungry and you gave me meat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in."

"If God has intentionally created each person out of God's own love, then we as a church—as God's instrument on earth—have a responsibility," said Central Christian's Mary Alice Mulligan. "I think Jesus Christ has given us an example of how to care for others: his preference was for the least, the lost, the last. That's where our preference needs to be, as well. Somehow, God gives the church the power to do that. The Holy Spirit works within the church, giving us the power to be the hands and feet of Jesus."

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- Virtually all congregations get requests for financial help or food, and many feel frustrated in their efforts to handle these requests.
- Most congregations have a policy against giving out cash. When they do offer financial help, it is usually limited to once a year, and is given in the form of a check to creditors.
- Cooperation among churches is rare in the field of poverty relief. Successful ones find a way to bridge theological differences at the outset.
- Investing time in conversation with those seeking help may reduce the number of requests that a congregation receives.
- Several agencies provide the same sort of help that people seek from congregations. Directories of these agencies are available on the Web and in print.
- Helping people in need is rooted in the teachings of various faith traditions. Most congregations feel obliged to attempt some form of poverty relief, despite the frustrations involved.

CONTACTS & RESOURCES:

Central Christian Church
701 N. Delaware St.
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 635-6397

Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation
6501 N. Meridian St.
Indianapolis, IN 46260
(317) 255-6647

Irvington Churches Advocacy Network
308 N. Emerson Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46219
(317) 322-9645

John Knox Presbyterian
3000 N. High School Rd.
Indianapolis, IN 46224
(317) 291-0308

Light of the World Christian Church
5640 E. 38th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46218
(317) 291-0130

Congregation Shaarey Tefilla
5879 Central Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46220
(317) 253-4591

Speedway United Methodist Church
5065 W. 16th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46224
(317) 241-1563

Westminster Presbyterian Church
445 N. State Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46201
(317) 632-9785

Agencies and Referrals:

Catholic Social Services Crisis Office
1435 N. Illinois St.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
(317) 236-1512

Salvation Army Social Service Center
540 N. Alabama St.
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 637-5551

The Sharing Place East
6024 E. 21st St.
Indianapolis, IN 46219
(317) 359-6566

The Sharing Place West
3976 Georgetown Rd.
Indianapolis, IN 46254
(317) 298-3180

Information and Referral Network
3901 N. Meridian St., Suite 300
Indianapolis, IN 46208
(317) 921-1305

IRN publishes the Rainbow Book, a comprehensive directory of agencies and organizations that provide human services in Central Indiana. In partnership with the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, IRN sponsors the Central Indiana Human Services Database, a Web version of the Rainbow Book, at www.imcpl.lib.in.us/cgi-bin/irntop.pl. IRN also sponsors Helpline, providing phone connection to helping organizations. The number is 926-4357 (HELP).

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