

## THE CHURCH AND THE 'RELIEFERS' \*

Churchmen should examine their own ingrained prejudices and fears and try to understand their neighbors in need.

Douglas G. Cater

"Depart from me,...into the eternal fire...for I was hungry and you gave me not food,...naked and you did not clothe me...."

"But, Lord, what kind of talk is this? We didn't really let you go hungry; we gave you \$23 a month for food, plus \$5 a month for clothing, to say nothing of \$9 for personal incidentals and \$3 for laundry! We admit you couldn't live very well on it, but we didn't let you starve! We even paid your doctor bills. We kept you alive. What kind of ingrate are you? After all, if you wanted more you should have gone out and earned it!"

How would the Son of Man reply to that? It is my feeling that this is one of the most important questions facing the American churches. Now that the President of the United States has reminded us that poverty exists in our country, and now that the "servant church" idea is becoming prominent in theology, the time should be ripe for a rethinking of the church's role in regard to the American poor, including those millions who are supported by welfare checks. Although the average middle class churchman does not realize it, the lives of welfare recipients are generally miserable and not much is being done to change the situation.

A large proportion of today's welfare recipients are urban Negro slum-dwellers, and it is about them specifically that I speak, from my vantage point as an ordained minister who is presently a public aid caseworker in the Negro ghetto of Chicago. (The picture in other cities is, I understand, similar.)

### What It's Really Like

Contrary to popular opinion, only a small percentage of the males and single females who receive public aid are able-bodied and capable of holding jobs. And the majority of these would support themselves were they not caught in a wave of chronic unemployment wherein unskilled laborers simply cannot find jobs. Many of them were laid off by large industries which moved from the city or drastically reduced work forces because of automation. Not the least of their burdens is the knowledge that society as a whole--middle class Negro as well as white--thinks of them as "chiselers" who could support themselves if only they wanted to.

By far the majority of the single persons on welfare are either indigents over 65 who receive Old Age Assistance or persons who got Disability Assistance because of physical inability to work. In Chicago, although living costs are sky-high, the average person in these categories must live on a welfare grant of about \$40 per month (plus rent), figured approximately as noted at the beginning of this article. Moreover, often he is physically unable to get to a supermarket and must

buy high-priced food at neighborhood groceries. His poor health is aggravated by constant worry, and on his meager food allowance (officially figured at 78 cents per day) he cannot afford to buy foods which might improve his health. Society forces him to live in slums where he is in constant fear of attack and robbery, and then makes his life doubly miserable by the meagerness of his relief check. (He may be considered fortunate if he happens to have close friends or relatives who will defy the law and supplement his check with a few extra dollars each month.)

The largest number of persons supported by public assistance are members of families who receive Aid to Dependent Children. Except in relatively few cases, the head of the "A.D.C. family" is an unmarried mother or one who has been deserted by her husband. She has the tremendous responsibility of rearing her children under very difficult circumstances and on a meager budget. (On the average, in addition to rent, she receives about \$31 per month for herself, \$19 for each child under six, \$27 for each child aged six to 12 and \$36 for each teen-ager.) On this budget she has great difficulty keeping the children adequately clothed, especially if some of her children are unusually "hard on clothes." Shoes are a problem, as low-priced shoes wear out very rapidly. And to keep a family well fed on the meager food allowance included in the above figures would be a challenge even to a professional home economist, especially in cases where --as often happens--some of the children have huge appetites or special dietary needs. However, few A.D.C. mothers are schooled in the fine arts of marketing and meal preparation, and their caseworkers are not trained to give guidance in these crucial areas.

It is easy to see that one month's A.D.C. allowance is barely enough to last until the next check. One can imagine the crisis produced when a check is late, lost or stolen. And yet this frequently happens; checks are likely to be seven to 15 days late when a family moves to a new address or a check is "held" pending investigation of some suspected irregularity. The welfare agency will seldom issue emergency assistance when checks are delayed; about all the caseworker can do is to advise the recipients to borrow money. Usually they are able to do so, but in not a few instances A.D.C. mothers are driven to prostitution in order to be able to buy food for their hungry children.

#### The Sense of Stigma

It is difficult for persons with adequate incomes to imagine how hard-pressed the A.D.C. mothers are to find the money needed to meet normal expenses of child rearing, such as fees requested by the public schools or emergency transportation fares when children suddenly become ill. Aside from strictly financial problems, life on A.D.C. is beset with tribulations fostered by the environment in which the families must live. They usually reside either in high-rise public housing projects where the juvenile crime rate is very high or in substandard housing within the confines of a ghetto created by racial segregation. Many landlords, knowing their tenants cannot escape from the ghetto, make few if any building repairs yet charge exorbitant rents. Moreover, the rent ceilings imposed by the welfare department force large

families to stay in small and inadequate apartments or in larger ones which are in very poor condition. Most of the better housing within the ghetto is unavailable to A.D.C. families (unless an employed friend rents an apartment on the family's behalf), and the better--and lower-priced!--housing in the white areas of town is totally unavailable. Even an A.D.C. mother who is an excellent housekeeper is not free to move into a neighborhood where violence and danger are at a minimum and the landlords take good care of their buildings.

I have been impressed with the sense of stigma which most of these people feel simply because they receive aid. They are looked down upon and vilified by the entire community, Negro as well as white. They speak wistfully about wanting to "get off this thing" (they seldom refer to welfare by any term which implies dignity). Most A.D.C. mothers would like to work, but it is extremely hard for them to find jobs which pay living wages or to make adequate child care arrangements. Sometimes they bring on physical and emotional exhaustion, with consequent illness, by pounding the pavements and scrimping on their food money to pay carfare and babysitters in vain efforts to find jobs. If they lack high school diplomas, as most do, probably the only work they will be lucky enough to get will be domestic, restaurant or laundry jobs paying \$35 to \$45 per week. Of this amount an employed mother will have to pay \$15 or \$20 per week to a babysitter and her income will still have to be supplemented by A.D.C. Since she will still be no better off financially, and the strain will be considerable, it is easy to understand why an A.D.C. mother may resist the welfare agency's efforts to compel her to find and take such a job.

With work largely unavailable, many an A.D.C. mother becomes lethargic and resigned to the depressing life of poor food, noisy children for whom she cannot adequately provide and periodic investigations by the welfare department. It is little wonder that she easily falls victim to the kindness or pseudo-kindness of a man who offers a little tenderness and perhaps a few dollars or something needed by her children. Most of the men with whom she comes in contact are poor marriage prospects, quite likely being unemployed and/or emotionally unstable, and they tend to be exploitative and irresponsible. They accept the sexual standards of their community, whereby sexual relations are an expected part of dating behavior, but usually are disinclined to use contraceptives even if they can afford them. The A.D.C. mothers often lack knowledge of the whole subject of birth control, and most welfare departments do very little to enlighten them. (In Illinois, until very recently, caseworkers were prohibited from discussing the matter with their recipients. The subject still must be treated very cautiously.)

Middle class persons tend to find it difficult to understand why some A.D.C. mothers continue to bear child after child, and feel that they must be calculating and mercenary. The truth is that the typical A.D.C. mother is starved for affection and tends to take it as she can find it, even though she realizes that life will be more difficult if another child is added to the family. Temporary though they may be, her love affairs serve to ease the feeling of lonely responsibility which

plagues her existence as she tries to rear her children alone in a largely hostile environment.

### Philosophies Official and Unofficial

How do the public welfare departments seek to aid these people in distress? According to official government philosophy, their money grants are intended to provide a reasonable standard of living and a fairly comfortable existence. In actual fact they provide a bare-minimum standard of living, experienced under very unpleaant conditions. The duty of public aid case-workers is to "give services" to the recipients; in actuality this means that they try to help them live as comforably as possible within the conditions imposed by the status quo. A conscientious caseworker will listen sympathetically to his clients' complaints and will obtain for them all the allowances to which they may be entitled. He will also seek to put them in touch with such resources as are available to help them deal with their problems, including their unemployment. And yet he is an agent who helps to perpetuate the "system;" it is he who must rigidly determine eligibility, making sure that no recipients are getting more money than they are entitled to. In effect, his job is to see that the elemental needs are met and that the recipients are, with some minimal degree of comfort, "adjusted" to the situation in which they must live. His work therefore has an ethically dubious effect: it prevents their smoldering discontent from erupting into the militant anger which alone is likely to lead to any serious consideration of their manifold problems by "the powers that be."

Of course, much of the work done by welfare departments is based on a constructive philosophy. The department in Chicago, for instance, has recently attempted to attack some of the worst social evils by sending some recipients to school in the evenings, training a few for available jobs and withholding rents from the landlords of the very worst slum buildings. Unfortunately, much of the effort of welfare departments is based on an unofficial philosophy, derived from public sentiment (and often voiced by state legislators), which runs something like this: "Give the reliefers as little money as possible, just barely enough to keep them from starving, thereby making them so uncomfortable that they will bend their energies to finding other sources of income and will get off the taxpayer's back."

The average middle class American, even if he is a professing Christian, tends to agree with this philosophy because he believes that public aid recipients are cheats and chiselers who are determined to milk the taxpayers of as much money as possible. He does not realize that the effect of the philosophy is not that the recipients leave the rolls but rather that they cling even more desperately to what they perceive as their only source of security. He does not understand that by voicing his hostility to them he is literally adding insult to the injury which society has done these people.

### Middle Class Confusion

Why is it that middle class Americans feel so strongly and so irrationally in this matter? Apparently they feel very much threatened by the idea that anyone should be allowed a comfortable existence if he is not paying for it himself. Ostensibly there is fear of being taken advantage of, but on a deeper level there is apparently a great anxiety concerning the whole subject of dependence. To admit that some men must depend on "public charity" is to be reminded that one may oneself someday be dependent--and this many people in our success-oriented society find intolerable to contemplate.

Also, great anxiety lies beneath the overt resentment which many middle class people feel against the A.D.C. mother who has "illegitimate" children. Sometimes this personal resentment seems even stronger than that exhibited against the merely unemployed. The reason would seem to be that A.D.C. women are thought to be not only cheating the taxpayers but enjoying themselves sexually in the process. They are seen as having no restraint, no inhibition and no sense of responsibility, asking moreover to be supported by those who restrain themselves from such licentiousness. One detects a note of intense jealousy underlying this surface resentment.

The problem is more than mere jealousy, however; there is tremendous confusion about the whole area of sexual standards. The "respectable" middle class person is greatly perplexed as to what he believes (or thinks he should believe) concerning sex. Much is being written about increased pre-marital sexual relationships on college campuses and about increased adultery in suburbia. The middle class Christian is not sure where he should stand on these matters, and he is infuriated by people who seemingly are untroubled about them and who simply enjoy themselves "doing what comes naturally." Consonant with these feelings, he is likely to be opposed to free birth control services for A.D.C. mothers on the grounds that this would allow sexual license without any "retribution" whatever.

### What Can Be Done

The churches should have a strategy for counter-acting such irrational and hostile attitudes toward the needy. They should be helping their members take the first step toward loving these particular neighbors--the examination of their own ingrained prejudices and fears and a simultaneous attempt to understand the problems of the neighbors. Denominational leaders, and especially local pastors, should become familiar with the basic facts about the reliefers (all too briefly summarized above), and then see that their congregations are confronted with them in suitable ways. Would it not be appropriate for class and discussion groups in local churches to tackle this subject as diligently as they do the study of their denominational foreign mission work? By this means church members could be made to realize that it is they themselves, as participants in their society, who are perpetuating the social conditions which force some of their neighbors to apply for public aid.

It is my conviction that if American churchmen are to take seriously their Lord's words about "the least of these his brethren," some serious study of this subject is needed by responsible groups within the local churches.\* Specific topics which should be considered at length would include the following:

(1) Common accusations made against welfare recipients.

These should be examined in detail and truth should be distinguished from mere rumor. An important subtopic would be the widespread suspicion about "welfare cheating." It should be pointed out that the percentage of recipients who have additional (and therefore illegal) income is probably very small. But it should be clearly recognized that "cheating" is often the only way in which a recipient can attain a reasonably "decent" standard of living, since the avenues to this end which are open to the middle class person are simply unavailable to most reliefers.

(2) The social conditions which cause the welfare rolls to swell; e.g.: (a) The unemployment situation. The groups should study the causes of unemployment in their own communities and consider whether they can do anything to alleviate the problem, even to a small extent. (b) The housing situation. The groups should investigate the housing available to minority groups in their own communities and consider what might be done to make more dwelling units available to these ghetto-bound people. A host of related issues would of course have to be considered, including the white man's fear of "open occupancy," the problem of slum landlords and the need for education of slovenly tenants in the proper care of buildings. (In considering possible action in these areas the groups would of course wish to learn what measures their civic leaders are already contemplating--especially now that federal "antipoverty" money is available for local projects--and make their own voices heard concerning them.)

(3) The problem of birth control services. The theoretical issue concerning the advisability of such services for A.D.C. mothers should be dealt with in the light of an understanding of the mores and the unstable social milieu of lower class Negroes. If such services are judged advisable the groups should consider steps to be taken to influence the community toward making them available.

The most immediate, practical help that the churches and their individual members can give to public assistance recipients is to demand that their state governments increase the size of welfare grants. Legislators may not be much impressed by sociologists' statements about the effects of poverty, but word from a sufficient number of voters will be quickly heeded.

Another immediate, practical effort which individual congregations can make involves service projects among particular groups of the needy. Many inner city churches and settlement houses warmly welcome concerned cooperation from suburban and other churches in meeting needs for used clothing, tutoring of school children who need special attention or medical services from professionals who will volunteer their time.

Important as such local-level measures are, perhaps it is even more important that national denominational leaders develop a definite position on the subject of public aid and make it

known to the government officials who administer the welfare program. I believe this should include strong support for a combined emphasis on adequate grants and accelerated job training programs. The voices of church leaders should also be heard on related issues such as that of birth control services for A.D.C. mothers. An official position on this subject should be based not only on an ideal "Christian view of sex" but also on an understanding of the specific situation of urban Negroes whose chances for contracting stable marriages are severely limited by the unstable milieu within which they must exist.

Whatever the concrete measures decided upon, it seems to me imperative that the churches should begin to hear and respond to the voice of their Lord saying, "I was hungry, thirsty, naked, and sick, and your small welfare checks kept me that way. I was a stranger and you preferred that I remain one. I was in 'prison' and you decided to keep me there. How long will you treat me so?"

Note: The recent drastic change on the whole question of "birth control," taken by the Chicago Board of Health. N.C.

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