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Faith-Based Food Assistance in the Rural South

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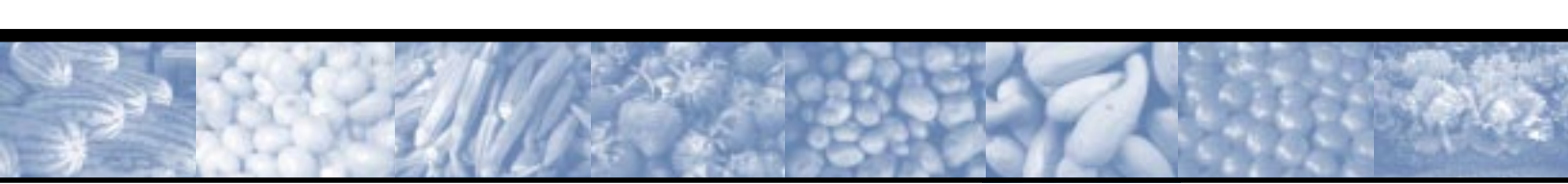
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The Charitable Choice provision in the 1996 welfare reform law identifies religious congregations as a potential outlet for social services underwritten by public monies. Soon after the presidential election, the Bush administration began building a political infrastructure for the massive expansion of publicly funded faith-based initiatives. At the federal level, policymakers, social commentators and even religious groups themselves continue to debate the merits and practicality of using public funds to underwrite the activities of faith-based social service organizations. Yet, since the passage of welfare reform, several states have implemented Charitable Choice partnerships between human service agencies and local faith-based congregations [4,8]. In light of these developments, we embarked on a study to examine the food assistance strategies currently employed by a heterogeneous sample of religious communities in

rural Mississippi. Our qualitative study is based on in-depth interview data collected from religious leaders in 30 Mississippi congregations (differing in denomination, size and racial composition), with follow-up observational research collected from a subsample of five congregations.

Although previous research suggests that religious communities can often provide services that counter the effects of poverty, faith-based social services have not been compared directly with government programs. Moreover, food assistance has received limited attention in a research literature that has focused more squarely on economic support and health care services provided by religious congregations. No study has focused sustained attention on the relationship between faith-based food assistance programs and other congregational sources of relief with an eye toward evaluating the feasibility of Charitable Choice initiatives.

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Mississippi provides an ideal test case in which to examine the feasibility of faith-based welfare reform. A wide range of statistical indicators underscore the pervasiveness of poverty, food insecurity and persistent hunger in Mississippi [2,5,6]. Along with several other Southern states, Mississippi is among the nation’s leaders in food-insecure households. Recent data reveal that 14 percent of all households in Mississippi are characterized by food insecurity—compared with a national rate of 9.7 percent food-insecure households and a generally stable rate of 11 percent in the South at large. Mississippi is also among the nation’s leaders in the percent of all families facing persistent hunger (4.2% in Mississippi, compared with the national rate of 3.5%). At the same time, Mississippi also boasts one of the most highly religious populations in the country, with Baptists and Methodists dominating much of the state’s religious landscape [3].

Strategies of Congregations

Religious leaders in our sample are virtually unanimous in defining faith-based aid and food assistance broadly enough to include both a material component and a nonmaterial dimension. Local pastors commonly argue

that faith-based aid provision is a holistic endeavor that—unlike public assistance programs—aims to address the material needs of the disadvantaged while simultaneously providing the means for moral development and spiritual sustenance. Yet, despite a virtually unanimous commitment to holistic relief, many congregations develop a preference for particular aid-provision strategies. Congregations typically utilized one or more of four different strategies to offer food assistance.

Intensive Relief: Sustained Engagement with the Hungry

One food provision strategy utilized by several local churches is intensive engagement with those facing persistent food insecurity. Intensive engagement entails sustained, face-to-face contact with the poor. These congregations are typically located within or nearby low-income neighborhoods, and many count the working poor and disadvantaged persons among their members. Various types of disadvantages—hunger and malnutrition, substance abuse, inadequate housing, educational deficiencies and unemployment—are fought with intensive relief efforts. Among congregations that utilize this aid-provision strategy, ministers defend the merits of sustaining intimate, face-to-face contact with the disadvantaged within and outside of their faith community. These pastors commonly argue that it is only through such intensive, enduring contact that they can cultivate

solidarity and friendship with the poor. Through these bonds, they can become a trusted and reliable source of basic necessities to the needy and can offer lasting emotional support to those who face persistent poverty.

In many cases, faith communities that favor this approach to poverty relief have structured the physical facilities and social activities of their congregation to facilitate close contact with poor persons. Churches with on-site food pantries and frequent hot meal programs welcome the poor onto their physical premises and into their congregational community. Intensive relief initiatives make food directly and regularly available to the hungry. Consistent with the holistic approach to aid, food pantries in congregations highly committed to intensive relief often facilitate enduring bonds between the aid-provider and the relief recipient. On a fundamental level, the interactions facilitated in many on-site food pantries are marked by an intimate familiarity with the aid recipient’s name, life circumstances and immediate social circles. Such venues transform the nameless, faceless “poor” and “hungry” into actual living persons whose struggles can be heard, understood and redressed—at least in part—through the intensive benevolence of the religious community. At the same time, a congregation’s choice to house a food pantry on its grounds serves as a publicly visible emblem of that church’s commitment to the needy within the local community.

More than any other form of



Food Assistance Strategies

Four common methods of helping the poor avoid food insufficiency were found in rural Mississippi church congregations.

Intensive Food Relief

- Food assistance provided to local needy populations over sustained period of time.
- Promotes close interpersonal relationships between food providers and recipients.
- Requires careful planning, ample volunteer support, and enduring base of material resources from sponsoring congregation.
- *Example:* On-site food pantry with hot meal program.

Intermittent Direct Food Assistance

- Food assistance provided to local poor on one-time, short-term, or seasonal basis.
- Direct but typically fleeting contact between food provider and recipient.
- Fewer volunteers and modest resources required; smaller number of needy served.
- *Example:* Holiday food baskets provided to food-insecure families.

Parachurch Food Assistance

- Local faith-based agency coordinates food provision between area congregations.
- Seen as efficient “one-stop” agency to which congregations may refer church-door solicitors; centralized record-keeping aims to discourage fraudulent requests.
- Agency may reinforce social distance between privileged providers and impoverished recipients of food assistance.
- *Example:* Ministerial associations or interfaith relief agencies.



Distant Missions of Food Provision

- “Pilgrimages” of food provision entailing mission trip to distant, impoverished locale.
- Short-term intensive exposure to severe food insecurity in distant locale sensitizes adult and youth congregants to plight of poor.
- Sensitivity gained from excursion does not necessarily promote local activism upon return from trip.
- *Example:* Mission trips to Mississippi Delta, dilapidated urban areas, Appalachia, Central America.

relief, intensive food assistance aims to weave together material provision and spiritual sustenance. Providing food to the hungry on a regular basis is materially significant given the pressing nature of hunger. Recurring hunger and chronic malnutrition can pose a threat to one’s physical health and psychological well-being. Moreover, episodic starvation can severely diminish the quality—and even the longevity—of one’s life. While these concerns are not to be minimized or dismissed, many faith communities that provide intensive food relief through on-site pantries aim to provide spiritual sustenance as well.

Food assistance at Faith Haven Church of God in Christ entails the provision of food packaged together as an assortment of goods—thereby underscoring the theme of holistic, well-rounded relief. Food items vary greatly from basic necessities such as canned vegetables and dry cereal to other items that might, at first glance, seem rather indulgent—for example, heart-shaped boxes of chocolates on Valentine’s Day. In this congregation and others like it, food beyond the necessities is provided to relief recipients to communicate the congregation’s love and concern for both the physical and spiritual well-

being of the needy. The inclusion of a heart-shaped box of chocolates within a food sack—and, in other congregations, the serving of a hot meal with grocery distribution—aim to establish a sense of intimacy between the concerned provider of aid and the needy recipient of such benevolence.

Intermittent Direct Food Assistance

A second benevolence strategy utilized by many congregations entails the provision of intermittent direct food assistance. This strategy is quite popular among a wide range of local congregations and takes a variety of forms.



At times, intermittent direct relief may take the form of semi-extended support under the auspices of “adopt-a-family” initiatives. In this scenario, an affluent religious congregation or some faction of members within it engages in benevolence work with a particular family facing hard times. Financial support, meals and child care may be provided until the family overcomes its hardship.

More common by far are congregations that use this aid-provision strategy to provide one-time aid in the face of a specific crisis, or disburse intermittent relief during particular times of the year. When individuals are forced to confront a house fire, a physical accident or the death of a relative who had no savings or burial insurance, a local church will often step in and provide short-term material relief—typically accompanied by offerings of social support such as short-term visitation. Here again, the provision of food occupies an important place in the intermittent direct relief provided by many local congregations.

Short-term food assistance that is provided to individuals who are well-known by congregants is commonly understood as “mutual aid.” Food-based mutual aid may entail a group of families within the congregation procuring, cooking and delivering a series of dinners to a needy household—e.g., a couple who recently had a baby, a member facing a short-term financial crisis. Alternatively, a pastor or member may

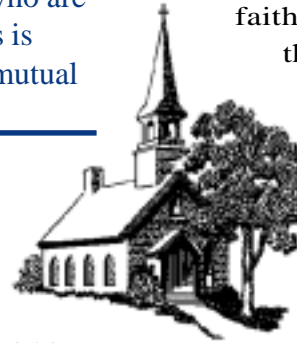
“Short-term food assistance that is provided to individuals who are well-known by congregants is commonly understood as ‘mutual aid.’”

go to the grocery store and purchase food for an elderly individual whose mobility is impaired. When mutual aid is practiced on a broad scale, religious communities function very much like a “revolving credit association” in which benevolence (in this case, food) is a currency that members invest regularly and withdraw in troubled times.

From the perspective of local congregational leaders, food-based mutual aid offers several key advantages. Questions about the character and actual neediness of those seeking aid are put to rest if persons requesting food assistance are themselves congregational members. In such cases, congregants providing food assistance are able to witness first-hand the ways in which their benevolence can help friends and co-religionists face hardship. In this respect, the congregation providing food builds deeper, more enduring relationships among its body of members. Because these momentary providers of food assistance may someday find themselves in need of such relief, they are wise to invest their time, energy and resources in the congregation’s mutual aid program as the opportunity to do so arises.

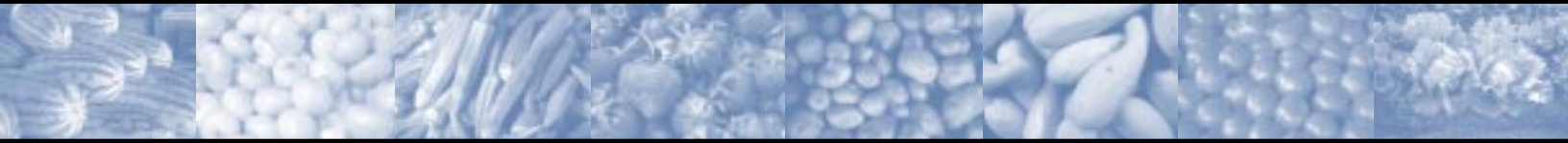
Aid solicitors who are not

known to members of local congregations present many faith communities with a thorny set of questions. Although most pastors eloquently discussed their aversion to aid-provision “standards” or “means tests,” many of



these same religious leaders conceded that limited financial resources and congregational-denominational accountability structures required the development of screening mechanisms for unknown aid solicitors or suspected “abusers” of faith-based benevolence, including foodstuffs. Aid-giving standards imposed by local faith communities vary considerably, but include call-backs to verify the source and status of phoned-in solicitations for aid, in-depth discussions of alternative avenues for resource acquisition, and an escort to the grocery store for supervised purchases.

To be sure, few religious leaders were willing to state outright that they would deny aid to nonmembers. Yet, several congregations whose social networks extend outside of the church can deny or withdraw aid if they have reason to believe an individual will squander limited congregational resources. Consequently, the same membership circles that enable churchgoers to support one another with intermittent direct relief also provide the power, if needed, to deny aid requests to nonmembers. Some



resource-poor religious communities with needy members perform very little “outreach” per se and instead focus on intracongregational benevolence because to include “outsiders” could threaten the congregation’s well-being. Many congregations that employ an intermittent aid-giving strategy for ministry to nonmembers wrestle with the conflicting imperatives of compassionate giving and discerning judgment. Some of the pastors that we interviewed point to struggles within their congregations regarding who should be helped and, especially, how members’ donations ought to be used for relief. Of course, religious organizations are guided by both ethical imperatives (e.g., helping those in need) and practical considerations (e.g., maintaining financial solvency). It is in confronting these difficult issues that some congregations have sought to cultivate collaborative relationships with parachurch relief agencies.

Parachurch Relief Agencies: Collaborative Food Assistance

A third congregational strategy for addressing food insecurity entails the forging of collaborative relationships with parachurch relief agencies. Why would faith communities opt to refer solicitors of food assistance to parachurch relief agencies? To begin, the centralized and standardized relief of parachurch agencies is believed to safeguard individual churches from aid solicitors who might advance fraudulent, self-serving, door-to-

door requests for relief. Standardized and centralized relief is typically used in large towns where population density makes knowing one’s neighbors difficult. Parachurch agencies typically employ screening procedures, often maintain a centralized database on agency contributors and aid solicitors, are open regular hours, and are overseen by individuals judged to be competent staff workers. In singing the praises of one local parachurch relief agency, Outreach and Uplift Relief (OUR) Ministries, one pastor offered the following account: “We have to be careful in the church—because the funds are limited—of who we help. So, there has to be a screening process, because unfortunately there are those people who are out there to make a living off of the church.”

Within congregations, membership characteristics and social conflicts sometimes make parachurch relief agencies an attractive option. Leaders in some churches comment on the time constraints faced by their members—many of whom are in dual-earner households where couples struggle to meet their own family obligations. When congregations support a number of nonprofit and interfaith relief agencies with philanthropic donations of food, money and clothing, they can refer individuals requesting food and other forms of material relief to these agencies. Consequently, faith communities that engage in extensive congregational philan-

thropy value the time—and, most likely, the trouble—that they can save themselves by channeling church-door solicitors for food and other provisions to parachurch relief agencies via referrals. Consequently, when employed as the sole or primary aid-provision strategy, philanthropic aid-giving and congregational referrals to parachurch relief agencies maintain or exacerbate social distance between local faith communities and the disadvantaged.

Distant Missions: Pilgrimages of Food Provision

Several congregations in the local area employ yet another aid-provision strategy, which we call “distant missions,” to engage in social ministry to poor and hungry populations removed from the local scene. Through various types of distant mission programs, congregations offer their membership the opportunity to participate in pilgrimages of relief provision to a needy population afar. Quite often, such trips entail providing food assistance—through soup kitchens and hot meal programs in mission shelters—to needy populations in a far away setting. Some distant mission programs utilized by local churches are centered around a proximate location in the Southern U.S.—typically, a one-day trip by van. Several affluent churches offer a full slate of distant mission trips from which interested congregants can, in the discourse of travel and tourism, “choose their preferred destination.” The relief itineraries



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and mission destinations offered in such churches range widely from weekend to multi-week excursions. Such trips may entail travel to remote areas of rural poverty or inner-city ghettos. For the most venturesome souls, select churches offer distant mission trips of approximately two weeks to an impoverished area abroad, including Central American sites near the Caribbean.

Distant missions are typically paired with another relief-provision strategy and are coordinated through pastors or adults who work with youth groups. Much like a religious pilgrimage, the aim of these missions is transformation and redemption on several levels. The relief work performed on these distant missions is designed to create small, but perceptible improvements to the disadvantaged community. In addition, distant missions can promote spiritual transformation for the travelers whose faith and camaraderie are enriched by the extraordinary challenges that they collectively confront on such sojourns. Of course, mission teams that provide food assistance to extremely disadvantaged populations face a dilemma. Should team members permit themselves to eat out—particularly in comfortable

restaurants—when they are confronted with needy persons who face extreme hunger on a daily basis? Particular mission teams develop their own methods for determining the appropriateness of eating out at nice restaurants during their trip to a poverty stricken mission field. Finally, many distant missions teach lessons about the cultivation of values such as hard work, thrift and self-sufficiency. Some youth-oriented distant missions are underwritten in part by young congregants’ fund-raising activities.

First-hand experience attaches faces, bodies and names to an otherwise abstract group of people—namely, “the hungry” and “the poor”—who are foreign to middle-class youngsters whose dinner tables and refrigerators are never wanting for food. However, at the same time, such outreach efforts entail a pilgrimage that propels the aid-givers *outside* of their own community. There is, then, no guarantee that distant-mission pilgrimages promote local activism—or even a permanent awareness of social inequality and food insecurity—upon the traveler’s return home.

The Future of Faith-Based Food Assistance in the South: Implications for Social Policy

Our exploration of faith-based food assistance undertaken in rural Mississippi congregations highlights the complex social processes underlying faith-based food assistance in the rural South. Our study yields

several significant implications for the formulation of social policy concerning faith-based food assistance. First, as congregations are integrated into civic efforts to redress hunger, it is important to recognize that food itself has significant cultural meaning within religious communities. In many religious communities within our study, the sharing of a meal and the provision of food are key social mechanisms through which faith-based fellowships are forged and sustained. In our overwhelmingly Christian sample of congregations, notions of “breaking bread together,” Jesus Christ’s edict to “feed my sheep,” and the commemorative significance of meals (e.g., the Last Supper) have a profound resonance. As a cultural resource, food itself and the relief initiatives surrounding it enable religious congregations to craft a distinctive history, a collective identity, and a unique relationship to the surrounding community [1,7]. Policies that utilize faith-based organizations to redress food insecurity should be informed by the recognition that food is a cultural marker—not simply an economic commodity or a source of nutritional sustenance—for religious communities.

In addition, we encourage policymakers and welfare administrators to evaluate carefully the range of food assistance strategies utilized by congregations in the local areas over which they have jurisdiction. In their pursuit of food security, policy-

makers and administrators should support faith-based food assistance strategies that will best redress the specific needs of food-insecure families on the local scene. For example, intensive food relief places the provider and recipient of relief in a sustained relationship with one another that can break down social barriers and address protracted food insecurity. However, intensive food relief requires a considerable investment of time and resources on the part of local congregations. Time-intensive programs might be most viable in religious communities with a sizable contingent of retired congregants or those committed to supporting such ventures over a long period of time.

As a one-stop service provider, parachurch relief agencies may be seen as an efficient conduit for the short-term disbursement of food to local disadvantaged populations. Parachurch agencies can retain

“Faith-based food assistance initiatives implemented under Charitable Choice should be structured with an awareness of the opportunities and the limitations likely to accompany such programs.”

records of recipients' aid solicitations, thereby relieving some pastors' concerns about fraudulent requests for food and other aid. However, given the social distance that parachurch agencies can produce between the providers and recipients of relief, these organizations are unlikely to build the integrative, enduring connections between the privileged and the poor. In the end, policymakers should seek to ascertain the needs of food-insecure families (e.g., protracted hunger, short-term food insecurity) before opting to support a specific strategy of faith-based food assistance.

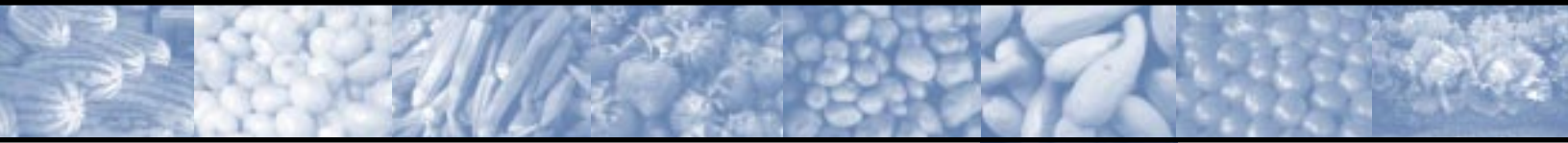
Our study of faith-based food

assistance strategies utilized by rural Mississippi congregations reveals that religious communities can be a valuable ally in our society's effort to reduce food insecurity. At the same time, faith-based food assistance initiatives implemented under Charitable Choice should be structured with an awareness of the opportunities and the limitations likely to accompany such programs. Many Americans can agree that food insecurity is a serious problem in a society marked by such an abundance of resources. Yet, solving this problem with the support of local congregations will require a keen awareness of the role of food in religious communities and a critical appraisal of the strategies faith-based organizations have adopted to overcome hunger in all its forms.



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