

# Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Charity is not enough

Amid all the pitches for consumer products at this Christmas season, we're also deluged with pleas to give to charity. Local newspapers and TV highlight aid for veterans and toy drives for poor children. With our current economy and state budget cuts, local food banks, shelters, and services for youth, the elderly, and migrants are in unusually great need.



In hard economic times, those of us with ample resources often need to increase our usual gifts to support the arts and education, too. And as commercial media become ever more strident and biased, it's even more imperative to help fund public radio and public TV.

We must also look past our own front doors. Both national and global charities need our help to provide famine and disaster relief, medical care, environmental protection, and education, all on a vast scale. By re-



searching church-related agencies and other nonprofits online, we can choose a few with the highest standards and concentrate the effect of our giving.

Besides appreciating the many people who give money to charities, I especially admire those who are far more active than I in donating their own labor. Yet, as valuable as all these efforts are, I urge you to go beyond giving to charity and volunteering. I hope you'll also consider advocating and working for justice.

## Advent: A time to rethink giving

For Christians, this season is the beginning of a new church year. Advent is a season of repentance, a time to take a fresh look at the gap between the unjust world we live in and the just world we are called to create.

Many of the most compelling Bible readings used during Advent come from the Hebrew prophets who urged the Hebrew people to promote justice. Thoughtful pastors and teachers push us to reflect on how the

## Charity, advocacy, and more

Joerg Rieger is a friend who is a professor at Perkins, the United Methodist seminary at SMU in Dallas. He holds a chair that my family and I endowed, but he was independently appointed and we do not influence his teaching or research. However, he kindly indulges me in occasionally discussing his writing, much of which emphasizes economic justice. A recent article about what he calls "deep solidarity" (from the book *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness*; Diaz et al., eds.), gave me welcome food for thought.

Rieger, who is originally from Germany, notes that many Americans are not aware of how differently we approach the concept of social engagement. Precisely because government aid is lower in the US than in most other developed countries, volunteerism and charity tend to be higher. But are we failing to address the underlying conditions that create the need for charity? Many might argue that this is America's blind spot, as we also rank surprisingly low on scales such as social mobility, education, health, and happiness.

As the economic crisis sharpens injustices that threaten the US middle-class dream, Rieger hopes that more of us will become advocates, speaking out to support oppressed groups from laid-off workers to migrant laborers. The term "solidarity" that he uses for such efforts doesn't connect very well for me, and I tend to feel more empathy with other groups who lack power: women, laypeople, independent thinkers. But I'm sure he's right that charity alone is not enough.

## Beyond advocacy to activism



Rieger is encouraged by Occupy Wall Street and its offshoots, as a sign that some Americans are finally willing to be activists for economic justice. I'm more skeptical about expecting average people to camp in public places or protest against a vague list of social ills without a clear call for positive action.



Still, I wonder how more of us could not only speak out as advocates but also engage in visible, peaceful public action. What will change systemic injustice, not just relieve individual suffering?

prophets' world is like our own. What do the prophets advocate, and what action do they call us to take?

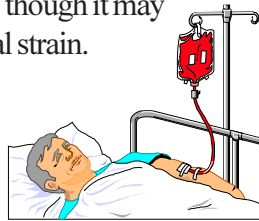
God still calls us to protect the widows, orphans, and strangers in our midst. But who are those among us who need our help today, often through no fault of their own? We must urgently ask ourselves why, in such a wealthy, fortunate nation, not just lazy or unlucky individuals but entire groups of people still need charity, and why need and want are now increasing rather than decreasing.

**... they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way ...**

—Amos 2:6-7

### Who are our widows and orphans?

Widows were among the weakest in ancient cultures because women depended on husbands for food, income, and security. Today, literally losing one's spouse is no longer such a dire sentence, though it may still bring loneliness and financial strain.



But who are the equivalents of widows today, those who would be lost without society's protection? Could our modern widows be the ill, disabled, and elderly? Perhaps the prophetic voices today are those who cry out that equal access to health care is a human right—a right that society, not charity, should guarantee.

Similarly, even though orphans are no longer doomed to beg in the street, could our modern orphans be our children and youth who need public education?



Prophetic voices might urge us not to condemn urban and minority children to inferior schools, or to segregate richer students away in private schools. We all have an equal stake in the outcome of public education. Shouldn't we take equal responsibility for it?

### Who are our strangers in need?

And who are the modern-day strangers, the people among us who seem alien and threatening, but are not so different from ourselves? In ancient times, people from the next tribe over the hill were often greeted with suspicion, but the law of God protected them when

traveling. We travel far more today, and know foreign lands much better thanks to TV and the internet, yet violent tribalism still flares up in many regions. Even in supposedly civilized countries like our own, many of us still become aggressive and irrational when it comes to categorizing people as insiders and outsiders. The prophetic voices in our midst must keep reminding us to put ourselves in the place of those we're tempted to fence out or lock away.

**I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. ... Just as you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me.**

—Matthew 25:42-45



Getting to know personal stories of people like economic migrants, addicts, or prisoners can help. When we do this, these “strangers” often turn out to be more like us than we had realized.

### Who are our unjust rulers?

**... I will be swift to bear witness ... against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien ...**

—Malachi 3:5

Unlike ancient nations, we can't blame a king or an emperor for our problems. But as citizens of democracies and members of churches whose leaders are elected, we can influence what these leaders do. So we need to make stronger efforts to speak truth to power, and to elect leaders more willing to heed prophetic voices.

How do our elected representatives, and the current candidates for office, respond to calls for justice? Do they speak out for the powerless, or for those with wealth and influence? Are they advocates for social and economic justice or for the status quo? Do they urge us forward to greater equality and compassion, or do they look back to a mythic

**Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of their right, that widows may be your spoil and that you may make the orphans your prey!**

—Isaiah 10: 1-3

golden age, such as the time of our nation's founding, that was in fact less peaceful and less just than our time?



Most of all, do our leaders have the courage to speak out when they disagree with the majority or with their own supporters and allies? Do they seek to placate backward-looking constituents, or to educate them? True leaders need the courage to be advocates and prophetic voices, even when that makes them unpopular. Being a voice in the wilderness is uncomfortable but often very important.

### What stirs us to prophetic advocacy?

Speaking out against great odds can feel daunting. If we ourselves find it hard to be advocates, it will be even harder to rouse other people to advocacy or to action. The older I get, and the more opposition or indifference I encounter within the church and even among my friends, the more I struggle against apathy and discouragement. Still, I hate to give up.

How can we motivate people, including ourselves, to risk speaking out? One answer is to focus on compassion and empathy—picturing ourselves in the place of suffering people, and actually putting ourselves among them if possible. That seems to be essential for following Jesus. Isn't it what loving our neighbors as ourselves means? The more we see firsthand what others are experiencing, the better we can react with compassion instead of anger or accusation.

### What action can we take?

#### ✓ Understand repentance as a collective need

The biblical prophets' call to repentance was clearly directed at their entire society, not just at individual sin. Seeing poverty, disease, and injustice as problems that

affect all of us, and for which all of us are responsible, is more appropriate than blaming individuals.

Understanding that we are all limited by our background and circumstances can help us sympathize with those who lack different kinds of power, whether money, influence, or social support. It can also help us understand why some people find it easier to speak out than others. Different ones of us are enabled and motivated to address different manifestations of injustice, and supporting each other's efforts is essential if we want all the needed changes to happen.

#### ✓ Seek out stories that inspire empathy

In order to put ourselves in others' places, we need to hear specific examples from real life. If we were dirt-poor Mexican peasants, we might feel that the only way to feed our children was to cross the border and work illegally. If we were gay or lesbian, we might yearn to marry or raise children with a partner. If we committed a crime, we would not want to be treated as subhuman, locked away with no hope of redemption.



One way to make social injustice more real to us is to see issues in terms of personal stories. Advent is a good time for groups to hear from individuals outside their own sphere of experience, either in person or through videos. A good place to begin a search is PBS, with excellent series such as *POV*, *Independent Lens*, and *Frontline*. Another is with books, especially memoirs and biographies.

#### ✓ Be advocates for reason and knowledge

While it is important to speak out on behalf of people, we must also never fail to speak out on behalf of ideas, to be an advocate for information. Especially in today's religious climate, where more and more groups are highly

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I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

organized to spread outdated theology and misinformation designed to exclude people, it's more important than ever to speak up for religious beliefs that reflect our most inclusive ethics and our best current knowledge.



✓ **Give to groups that practice advocacy**

In addition to being advocates individually, it is important to support groups whose staffs have the training and knowledge to expose and oppose specific injustices and help their victims. Many such groups are organized to train and make the most effective use of volunteers, in addition to making productive use of funds.

✓ **Speak out for those who are speaking out**

The good news is that many people are already doing all these things. But those activists need our support. If congregations or organizations in your community are engaging not only in charity but in public advocacy, they need publicity by word of mouth. If you know people who are bravely speaking up on behalf of others who suffer from injustice, and working actively for justice, give them words of appreciation.

I urge you to give generously this Christmas, not only in money and time but also in advocacy and in showing solidarity with those who need it most.

*Barbara*



**Connections**

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# Charity is not enough

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## Should Christianity be more like a protest movement?

Occupy Wall Street and its offshoots are part of a long history of protest movements. If you're interested in advocacy, I encourage you to read and think further about nonviolent social protest as an expression of Christian values. It would be an excellent topic for a class, sermon, or study group.



I tend to fear public protests because of the injuries and even deaths that sometimes result. Yet I know that many aspects of American society that I now see as vital would never have come about without protest movements, and that even more suffering results from failure to protest injustices. We see this from the work of Martin Luther King and other civil rights protests, and César Chávez's work with farm laborers. Earlier protests show it too: the suffragettes' marches for women's right to vote, and the campaign for access to birth control and sexual education led by Margaret Sanger. Current books such as *Rock the Casbah* by journalist Robin Wright reveal the suffering that the recent protests in Arab countries are trying to eliminate. Classic earlier examples of nonviolent protest include Gandhi's marches for independence in India, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and the women's movement against war in Liberia. And protests such as Jesus's entry into Jerusalem evidently were key aspects of his ministry and the early church.

How can we recapture that spirit now? Is public protest against injustice an essential part of Christianity?