

“Why ‘Servanthood’ Is Bad”

By John McKnight

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In a small, relatively isolated community on Martha’s Vineyard, about every tenth person used to be born without the ability to hear. Everybody in the community, hearing and non-hearing alike, spoke a unique sign language brought from England when they immigrated to Massachusetts in 1690. In the mid-twentieth century with increased mobility, the people ceased to intermarry, and the genetic anomaly disappeared.

But before the memory of it died — and the sign language with it — historian Nora Groce studied the community’s history. She compared the experience of the non-hearing people to that of the hearing people.

She found that 80 percent of the non-hearing people graduated from high school, as did 80 percent of the hearing. She found that about 90 percent of the non-hearing got married, compared to about 92 percent of the hearing. They had about equal numbers of children. Their income levels were similar, as were the variety and distribution of their occupations.

Then Groce did a parallel study on the Massachusetts mainland. At the time, it was considered to have the best services in the nation for non-hearing people. There she found that 50 percent of non-hearing people graduated from high school, compared to 75 percent of the hearing. Non-hearing people married half the time, while hearing people married 90 percent of the time. Forty percent of the non-hearing people had children, while 80 percent of hearing people did. And non-hearing people had fewer children. They also received about one-third the income of hearing people. And their range of occupations was much more limited.

How was it, Groce wondered, that on an island with no services, non-hearing people were as much like hearing people as you could possibly measure? Yet thirty miles away, with the most advanced services available, non-hearing people lived much poorer lives than the hearing.

The one place in the United States where deafness was not a disability was a place with no services for deaf people. In that community all the people adapted by signing instead of handing the non-hearing people over to professionals and their services. That community wasn’t just doing what was necessary to help or to serve one group. It was doing what was necessary to incorporate everyone.

I’ve been around neighborhoods, neighborhood organizations, and communities in big cities for thirty-six years. I have never seen service systems that brought people to well-being, delivered them to citizenship, or made them free.

When I’m around church people, I always check whether they are misled by the modern secular vision. Have they substituted the vision of service for the only thing that will make people whole — community? Are they service peddlers or community builders? Peddling services is unchristian — even if you’re hell-bent on helping people. Peddling services instead of building communities is the one way you can be sure not to help.

We all know that at the Last Supper Jesus said, “This is my commandment; love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this; to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” But for mysterious reasons, I never hear the next two sentences. “You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know the business of the one they serve. But I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything I learned from God.” It is not right to be hung back by service and servantry. The goal is to be a friend.

I’m consistently impressed by how dangerous people are who want to serve others. The service ideology and its systems don’t work for three reasons.

First, they constantly steal money from people who are poor. At the center where I work, we’ve added up how much money the four levels of government — federal, state, county, and city — specifically target for low-income people in Cook County. It adds up to about \$6,000 for every person with an income below the poverty line. (That figure is low; not everyone below the line participates in low-income programs.) For a mother with three children, that is the equivalent of \$24,000. Three years ago, the median income in Cook County was \$23,000. In one sense, we spend for every poor person more money than half the people in Cook County make. But Chicago still has poverty!

So I asked our researchers, “Of the money appropriated for low-income people, how much did they get in cash and how much in services?” They replied, “They got 63 percent in services and 37 percent in income.” Now, if you are a family of four, that means your servants walked away with over \$15,000 of the money appropriated for you while you got less than \$9,000.

Bureaucracy is not the problem. (Bureaucracy eats only about 6 percent.) The money goes to health- and human-service professionals: nurses, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrist, social workers, public-housing administrators, land-clearance officials, welfare workers. It doesn’t go to the poor.

The second problem with service systems is that they base programs on “deficiencies.” I fight whenever I can — in legislatures and before policy-making bodies — against “needs surveys” in low-income neighborhoods. Here is why.

I was organizing block clubs in West Side neighborhoods. I wasn’t very good. But people responded. They understood what I was saying. Then the anti-poverty program came, and within three years organizing became incredibly difficult.

The anti-poverty program sent people out to interview people this way:

“Mrs. Jones, we’re from such-and-such. We’re doing a survey. Can you tell me how far you went in school?”

She looks down a little and says, “Well, I just got through tenth grade.” So they write on the clipboard, “Dropout. Two years.” Not “educated ten years,” but “dropout two years.”

Then they say, “I wonder if you could read this to me.”

She looks at it, embarrassed. “No. I can’t read.”

“Illiterate,” they write. Then they say, “Just now you squinted your eyes. Do you have trouble seeing?”

“Yes. I think I need glasses.”

“Visual deficit,” they write. ““Do you have any children?””

“Three daughters, ages fourteen, sixteen, and eighteen.”

“Do any of them have children?”

“The fourteen-year-old has a child, and the eighteen-year-old has a child.”

“Teenage pregnancy,” goes on the clipboard.

Then they say, “We’re going to get you some help. Just wait. We’re going to make a service center here.” And they cash in their needs inventory for a GED dropout training center and three people who work there, for an illiteracy program with four staff people, for a neighborhood optometrist who is responsive to the community, and for a new teenage-pregnancy counseling program that gets the schools more money. This poor woman is a gold mine. That’s how she ended up getting one-third what the service system got.

When I go back to this woman, organizing, I say, “Mrs. Jones, I’m organizing for the local neighborhood organization, and your neighbor told me to talk to you. She told me that when her daughter was hit by an automobile

down at the corner, you took charge while she took her daughter to the emergency room. And when the tree fell down across the street, you're the one who came out and told people who to call, what to do about the tree. She told me you're the leader on this block. People trust you. People believe in you. People follow you. That's one of the most wonderful things in the world, because you have the opportunity to join with other people like yourself in the neighborhood to being to do more things than just deal with the tree and the crisis with the little girl. So would you come with me to a meeting tonight?"

"No," she says, "I'm waiting for the people in the white coats."

Service systems teach people that their value lies in their deficiencies. They are built on "inadequacies" called illiteracy, visual deficit, and teenage pregnancy. But communities are built on the capacities of drop-out, illiterate, bad-scene, teenage-pregnant, battered women like Mrs. Jones. If the church is about community, not service, it is about capacity, not deficiency.

Third, the service system displaces the capacity of people's organizations to solve problems. It says, "Don't form a community organization. Sit and wait for the white coat to come save you." The proliferation of an ideology of therapy and service as "what you need" has weakened associations and organizations of citizens across the United States.

Many churches and pastors have become the agents of systems. They themselves may not understand whom they represent, but they refer people to systems. Instead of building community, they help take responsibility away from the community and give it to professionals. People who do this in the name of the church and of Jesus are community busters. They are not agents of Christ.

Here are five rules to protect yourself from being the agent of the devil in the middle of a church. (I could give you ten if I had more space.)

Saul Alinsky referred to the first rule as the “iron rule”: Never do for others what they can do for themselves.

Second, find another’s gifts, contributions, and capacities. Use them. Give them a place in the community.

Third, whenever a service is proposed, fight to get it converted into income. Don’t support services. Insist that what poor people need is income.

There is a point where things called services can be useful. Most low-income communities are well beyond that point. If you improve the professional credentialing of big-city school teachers and systems, knowing and wisdom will decrease in direct relationship to the increase in that system’s poor. The increase in medical resources in Chicago is now decreasing the health status of poor people.

The fourth rule is a sort of subhead of the third. If those in power are hell-bent on giving poor people services rather than income, then fight for those services to come in the form of vouchers. That way the persons who must be served at least have a choice as to who will serve them. And there may be some competition.

Fifth, develop hospitality. Abraham, the head of a tribe, decided to follow a God who claimed to be the only God. That made Abraham and his people strangers in their own land. They journeyed as strangers through the world. And they developed some unique ideas about responsibilities to strangers because they were strangers themselves.

Jesus’ disciples were also people who decided to become strangers — in their own land and in others. They built communities based on their decision. That renewed their understanding of obligations to strangers, and hospitality was renewed.

In every household, in every tent, the door was open — to the stranger, the outsider, the enemy, or potential enemy. And the stranger was one with whom one acted, not in service, but equality. Then a terrible thing happened in third-century Italy. At the side of a monastery, they built a little room for strangers. And they called it a hospice. The church took over responsibility for the stranger. And Christians forgot what had been unique about their community — how to welcome the person who was outside and hungry.

The hospice hook hospitality out of the community. “Hospice” became “hospital.” The hospital became Humana, a for-profit corporation buying up church hospitals. Communities and churches have forgotten about hospitality. Now systems and corporations claim they can produce it and sell it and that you can consume it.

You must struggle with all your might to reclaim the central Christian act of hospitality. You will have to fight your local hospitals. You will have to fight Humana. You will have to fight the social services. They have commodified hospitality and called it a service. They have made a market of the temple. And you know what you’re supposed to do the money changers: get ‘em out! Or bring into the church the hospitality that is at the center of understanding a relationship as a friend not a servant. A church’s response to people without should be hospitality, not services.

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Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing Community Assets was written by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight. McKnight is the author of this article “Why Servanthood is Bad.” Though not addressing theological issues, nor presuming Christian activism, it presents a radically new departure for urban community re-formation, stressing assets rather than deficiencies. Published by ACTA Publications and 376 pages long, it is a bargain at \$12.00 through Amazon.com.

One review says that this is a guide that “. . .summarizes lessons learned by studying successful community-building initiatives in hundreds of neighborhoods across the U.S. It outlines what local communities can do to start their own journeys down the path of asset-based development.”