



## Social Services or Social Justice?

*Is charity just a poor substitute for justice?*

BY TERRENCE FERNSLER

### *What's Love Got to Do With It? A Critical Look at American Charity*

*By David Wagner. 210 pages. Hardcover. NY: The New Press.*

**D**oes charity exist as a substitute for social justice? That's what David Wagner postulates in this audacious and thought-provoking book.

Powerful people don't want justice, he says, because it would disrupt power relationships. So they use charity as an institutional way of assuaging guilt while keeping the status quo. Charity is cheaper than justice. It involves no income redistribution. Therefore, it is less politically risky.

Charity's success isn't based on empirical evidence of real effectiveness, Wagner says. Charity thrives because it offers heroic opportunities. However, charity signifies inequality.

Acting "charitable" and thinking we know best for others often means maltreating and oppressing them, Wagner asserts. He uses examples of organizations that punished Native Americans and the needy in the nineteenth century in the name of helping them. Attitudes haven't changed much. The poor house has been replaced by homeless shelters, group homes, and jails; the forced work of the work house is now workfare; and the war against almsgiving is now a war on welfare.

Charity is more symbolism than accomplishment, according to Wagner. Most organizations deliver advice, consolation, rehabilitation, and education rather than food, shelter, and other tangible goods. This stance fits

better into the moralistic guidance of our forebears and competes less with the capitalist market. It offers a non-threatening alternative to socialism or equity.

Social service doesn't really benefit the needy, he charges. Instead, it tends to individualize problems, dividing classes and communities. As nonprofits become increasingly used by the middle class, they sap services from the poor. In fact, nonprofits often serve the interests of the well-off rather than intended beneficiaries. The sector as a whole, he maintains, is not a vehicle for change.

Love is associated with charity work, but why, Wagner asks, can't it be associated with social justice leaders like Cesar Chavez or Malcolm X, who loved their people enough to work for social justice? Why can't we honor social diversity and help people simply by asking them what will work for them?

There may be parts missing from Wagner's argument and questions unanswered, but he raises valid issues. His book forces us to look at our organizations' reasons for existing. It challenges us to evaluate our effectiveness.

Wagner's views will be much criticized and debated, but the ensuing discussion can only enrich us. His book is revolutionary because he is trying to alter our thinking about what we truly value. It will certainly afflict the comfortable. ■

*Charity is cheaper than justice.*

*Terrence Fernsler is development director of the Resource Conservation and Economic Development District in Aberdeen, Washington, and president of the Development Training Institute, P.O. Box 15, 311 W. Martin, Elma, Washington 98541.*