Serving Up Sermons:

Clients' Reactions to Religious Elements at Congregation-Run Feeding Establishments

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The authors use participant observation and interviews with homeless individuals to investigate two questions: How are religious elements that occur in congregation-based food programs integrated into service delivery? How are those elements, especially sermons, perceived by those who eat there? The authors find that regardless of their religious beliefs, two thirds of the homeless respondents reacted negatively to the sermons they heard at congregation-based food programs, characterizing them as coercive, hypocritical, condescending, and conflicting with their own beliefs. Observations at these programs shed light on the source of these negative reactions: The sermons tend to ignore the local knowledge and experience of clients, and they assume that the homeless individuals are responsible for their own troubles.

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Although religious organizations have been an integral part of the social service sector since its inception (Ammerman, 1997; Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001; Netting, 1982; Queen, 2000; Smith & Lipsky, 1993), under Charitable Choice, religious groups are allowed to compete for and receive federal funds without changing their religious character (Chaves, 1999; Formicola, Segers, & Weber, 2003). The hope underlying Charitable Choice and efforts associated with the Bush administration's faith-based initiative is that religious organizations and congregations in particular will offer qualitatively better services than those offered by traditional nonprofit and government institutions (Green & Sherman, 2002; Loconte, 2004; Queen, 2000). These efforts have brought a renewed vigor to research on religious social services. Some recent research

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suggests that faith-based organizations (FBOs) may perform worse than traditional social service agencies (Biefeld & Seuss-Kennedy, 2003), whereas other research suggests that FBOs may offer clients a qualitatively better experience (Bartkowski, Grettenberger, Hall, & Smith, 2003) or that clients may consider these organizations to be more trustworthy (Wuthnow, Hackett, & Hsu, 2004).

One notable gap in our present knowledge concerns how the religious elements that are thought to make congregation-based social services special are perceived by recipients of those services. The paucity of research on this topic is surprising given that congregations in the United States are very active in the social service sector, with 57% of individual congregations offering at least one social service (Chaves, 1999; Nesbitt, 2001). Focusing on client reactions to sermons and sermon content at congregation-based food programs, we ask if this religious talk soothes clients or alienates them. We investigate this and other questions through interviews with homeless individuals and participant observation of the congregation-based meal programs at which they eat.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although there is considerable literature on the involvement of religious organizations in social services, little has paid specific attention to the service encounter at these organizations (Applewhite, 1997; Poppendieck, 1998). After outlining two problems that have been identified in service encounters between professional social service workers and their clients in nonreligious settings, we examine how introducing specific religious elements into service delivery may affect the emergence of these two problems in the congregational setting.

SOCIAL SERVICE INTERACTIONS: TWO PROBLEMS

The study of the relationship between service recipients and professional service workers has centered on how workers who view themselves as professional service providers interact with the clients they are serving (Abel, 1994; Applewhite, 1997; Gordon, 1988; Holbrook, 1996; Ladd-Taylor, 1986; Lin, 2000; Poppendieck, 1998; Williams, 1996). One problem identified by this research is that professional workers often do not respect the ideas, thoughts, and feelings of their clients, potentially leading workers to invalidate clients' local knowledge and experiences (Gordon, 1988; Ladd-Taylor, 1986; Poppendieck, 1998; Williams, 1996). Studies have shown that government social service workers often view their own knowledge and beliefs as superior to those of clients, instructing clients to disregard their own knowledge (Abel, 1994; Gordon, 1988; Ladd-Taylor, 1986). Such assumptions of superiority can lead to false judgments of clients and to interactions rife with mutual distrust, ultimately undermining client empowerment (Abel, 1994; Gordon, 1988). For

instance, in a study of three homeless shelters, Williams (1996) found that staff viewed their clients as lacking fundamental life skills, resulting in interactions that "were often framed by the disparity in power and authority between them" (p. 86). Thus, if staff ignore their clients' values, they may initiate a process that is harmful to the service relationship.

A second problem contributing to poor professional-client interactions is the view held by some social service workers that clients are responsible for creating their own plight. Rather than taking a structural view of poverty, social workers often believe that client problems stem from personal inadequacies (Applewhite, 1997; Gordon, 1988; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Williams, 1996). This view implies that poverty is caused by individual deficits in personal motivation, ethics, or moral character. Although not all professional service workers share this view (Netting & Williams, 1996), when present, it leads to treatment strategies aimed at repairing the character of the individual client, based on the belief that such repairs will eventuate in material success. This is problematic because when social workers view client problems through the lens of individual irresponsibility, they feel little sympathy for those they serve, thereby evoking skepticism and distrust from clients.

One might expect that these problems would be avoided in facilities, such as congregations, that rely on volunteers to deliver services. However, researchers have found that at least in their attitudes toward clients, volunteers are more similar to professionals than previously expected (Karl, 1998). Two studies of emergency food programs found that volunteers fostered animosity in their interactions with clients because of their unequal relationship as charitable giver and receiver (Poppendieck, 1998; Stein, 1989). This asymmetrical relationship often reflected deeper social class and status differences between clients and volunteers (Stein, 1989). Thus, differences in class and status between worker and client may be an alternative to professionalization as a mechanism creating antagonistic relations between volunteers and clients.

BRINGING RELIGION IN: THE REPRODUCTION OF PROBLEMS IN RELIGIOUS SETTINGS

The two problems of ignoring clients' local knowledge and of blaming clients for their own misfortune are common in volunteer and nonvolunteer social service settings. We investigate the extent to which the integration of religious elements into service delivery affects the emergence of these issues. This issue is especially important in light of arguments made in favor of faith-based or Charitable Choice initiatives. Supporters of these initiatives argue that incorporating religion within service delivery provides important benefits, including increased compassion on behalf of volunteers toward clients as well as increased effectiveness resulting from the addition of religious elements that afford clients psychological benefits not available in secular settings (Colson & Pearcy, 1999; Green & Sherman, 2002; Loconte, 2002, 2004; Olasky, 1997; Sherman, 1999).

Contrary to these claims, research indicates three reasons that the inclusion of religion in service settings can lead to difficulties. First, problems may occur if religious providers privilege their own religious motivations and perspectives and ignore the religious views and experiences of clients (Jeavons, 1994; Queen, 2000). Because assigning superior status to the views of workers rather than those of clients is a known source of tension in service relationships, it would not be surprising to find that if this happens within the religious setting, the elements that are argued to make congregational services uniquely valuable for clients may have the potential to make these services less than ideal.

A second possible source of trouble in the delivery of faith-based services is that in some congregational settings, participation in particular religious interactions is required of clients to receive services (Poppendieck, 1998; Reingold, 2001; Snow & Anderson, 1993). These compulsory rituals, which potentially conflict with the various religious views of the homeless, may contribute to imbalanced volunteer-client relationships, reproducing the problematic relationships between professional social service providers and their clients. This study focuses on the types of organizations that devote explicit attention to restoring the lives of clients through conversion and religious fervor, offering clients goods that are conditioned on participation in a religious activity, most frequently listening to a sermon. This practice is not characteristic of all faith-based services (for details on client reactions to other styles of faith-based service delivery, see Stephens & Sager, 2002); however, it is important to note that supporters of Charitable Choice encourage these organizations to perform social services because they view religious conversion or renewal as necessary for changing individuals' characters and practices that are thought to be the source of clients' troubles (Loconte, 2004; Olasky, 1997). What remains to be examined is whether the coercive authority with which this approach is practiced produces the same problems found in other social service settings.

Finally, studies also show that religious leaders may be even more likely than professionals to take an individual rather than a structural approach to addressing clients' troubles. In a survey of directors of FBOs, Reingold (2001) found that 69% of religious providers identified problems with the individual as the source of poverty, whereas only 59% of those trained in social work, counseling, and clinical psychology did so (9). When religious leaders see cultural and individual failings as responsible for their clients' poverty, they are likely to view religious conversion or renewal (an individual-level change) as most crucial in moving their clients out of poverty (Snow & Anderson, 1993). This is potentially problematic because, as discussed above, service providers taking an individualistic view of poverty face barriers to developing sympathetic and trusting relationships with clients.

Some literature on clients and service workers challenges the above portrayal. Two recent studies have highlighted the compassion social service workers have for their clients as well as their clients' positive experiences in

these situations (Bartkowski et al., 2003; Schneider, 1999). However, the little research that has been conducted on how clients experience religion in the service setting has several limitations. First, in some cases, research has been conducted within the service setting (Bartkowski et al., 2003), leading to concerns about the candor with which clients are able to respond to researchers. In other instances, it has focused solely on large-scale FBOs (Biefeld & Seuss-Kennedy, 2003; Jeavons, 1994; Wuthnow et al., 2004), or it has only examined one type of religious congregation (Schneider, 1999). In light of these findings, we formulate three questions: How do clients react to the integration of religious elements into service delivery? Does the inclusion of religious elements in congregations' service delivery recreate the same problems that have been identified in professional service settings? If so, why? We conclude that religious elements, at least when employed in a coercive manner, may provide an additional avenue that produces service experiences for clients that are less than positive.

DATA AND METHOD

Data were compiled using two different methods to investigate the integration of religious elements into congregation-run services and clients' reactions to encountering those elements. First, we engaged in participant observation in which a team of three researchers volunteered at local congregations that fed the homeless. Second, we conducted in-depth interviews with 30 homeless individuals who received food from these congregations, in addition to other feeding establishments in a midsize southwestern city. The particular advantage of this kind of two-phase study is that questions raised in the first phase can be examined in the second phase.

In the first phase, through participant observation, we obtained firsthand knowledge of how congregations carry out social service delivery and the manner in which religious elements are integrated into these services. To collect these data, we volunteered at five congregations involved in a network of congregations that served communal dinners. This network claims to serve 98% of the area's homeless population and more than 20,000 meals a month (network representative, personal communication, November, 23, 2000). We also observed three congregations that independently offered feeding services to the homeless, yielding a total of eight congregations in our study. A great deal of theological and doctrinal variety was present in our sample. Observed congregations ranged from fundamentalist Protestant congregations to fairly liberal Catholic congregations, with nondenominational Christian congregations being the most common. Unfortunately, no liberal or mainline Protestant congregations are included in our study.[1]

Although this research provided an inside look at the organization of service delivery within the feeding establishments, it did not allow for an accurate assessment of clients' reactions to the practices we observed. Therefore,

we conducted face-to-face interviews with 30 members of the homeless population. These interviews focused on how the homeless felt about the different facilities from which they received food. In this phase of the project, we wanted to determine the perceptions of homeless people regarding several aspects of the feeding establishments, in particular their feelings regarding the religious elements present during service delivery. Respondents were asked to report on each establishment they had visited within the past week, resulting in a total of 72 reports regarding specific food outlets. A combination of both open-ended and close-ended questions yielded qualitative and quantitative data from the interviews. The interview schedule contained questions regarding the clients' perceptions of the effects of being exposed to a religious message, their religious background, and their demographic information. Using niche sampling, a strategy widely regarded as the best for interviewing homeless (Snow & Anderson, 1993; Snow & Shockey, 1998), we chose three sites to conduct the interviews,[2] each of which is known as a location where large numbers of homeless people congregate. The demographic characteristics of our population closely resemble the last census of this city's homeless population (Snow & Shockey, 1998), making us reasonably confident that our sample is an accurate representation of the homeless population in our city.[3]

This study is limited by its focus both on service provision through soup kitchens and on the homeless. First, emergency food distribution is only one of several service activities in which congregations may engage, and this type of service activity may have particular characteristics, such as fleeting contact with clients, that affect our findings. Second, the homeless are a special population, often with multiple problems other than poverty, including mental health and addiction issues (Blankertz & Cnann, 1994; Klein & Cnaan, 1995; Sosin, 1981, 1992). Although these two qualifications rightfully place constraints on the generalizability of our findings, our choice of investigative location also has analogous benefits. First, research on congregation-run soup kitchens is important because emergency food distribution is by far the most common service activity performed by congregations in the United States (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001). Second, the homeless we interviewed often had multiple experiences with a variety of feeding establishments, producing an ability to make comparisons across facilities providing similar services that is not present in many service populations. Thus, we are confident this study offers insights into the potential problems or benefits that can occur because of the incorporation of religious elements in one important type of congregational social service.

RESULTS

In this section, we outline the specific religious elements present at faith-based feeding establishments. We then focus on how clients perceive these elements, exploring how these perceptions are related to the specific content of

the religious interactions. Finally, we offer further detail about sermons, exploring both their content and clients' reactions to hearing them.

RELIGIOUS INTERACTIONS: PRAYERS, SERMONS, AND INFORMAL RELIGIOUS TALK

Although volunteers at the congregations we observed interacted with the clients in a variety of ways, there were three common interactions with explicit religious content: prayers, sermons, and volunteers speaking individually with clients about religion or God. In all cases, prayers lasted 30 seconds and were conducted by the volunteer or congregation leader before the meal was served. Although their content varied somewhat, they were most often a blessing of both the homeless and the service providers. Providers hoped the homeless would participate in the prayer; however, clients were permitted to sit and listen without praying.

Sermons, on the other hand, were a quite different experience. Varying in style, length, and content, sermons required the participation of homeless by making attendance at them compulsory to receive a meal or a second serving. Although similar to prayer in that the meal recipient was required to at least listen, sermons and prayers differed greatly on several dimensions. Prayers were always short, whereas sermons lasted anywhere from 10 minutes to 2 hours. Although prayers were simple blessings, sermons were often complex stories or lectures about the Bible or religion, with many of the sermons containing personal interpretations of religion. Congregation volunteers or leaders conducted sermons at six of the nine congregations we visited: three of the nondenominational Protestant congregations, both Baptist congregations, and the Christian congregation whose specific denomination is unknown. Two of the six sermons were conducted by lay ministers, an additional two were conducted by professional pastors, and two were conducted by persons of undetermined status. Most important, sermons required that participants had to stay and listen for a significant amount of time to receive something of value (Snow & Anderson, 1993).

Finally, many of the congregations that incorporated sermons into their service delivery also encouraged face-to-face talk about religion between volunteers and clients. These conversations often involved some testimony on the part of the volunteer, followed by an urging of the client to accept Jesus as their savior. However, few clients reported having this type of interaction, most likely for the simple reason that the clients far outnumber the volunteers. Furthermore, in many cases, congregation leaders and members restricted this type of talk to those who requested it.

For three main reasons, our discussion focuses almost exclusively on the content and reception of sermons at these faith-based feeding establishments. First, although prayers were the most frequently observed religious element, they were generally short and were not used by the congregations as an opportunity for religious education or evangelism. In contrast, sermons were

long, required participation to receive a good or service, and contained specific religious messages. Second, unlike one-on-one interactions, the majority of our respondents (83%) indicated that they had heard a sermon at least once while visiting a soup kitchen in the past week. Finally, based on the comments offered by the homeless themselves, sermons were the most salient religious element present at soup kitchens. In fact, for many of the homeless, the prayers that were conducted at the congregations were not even considered religious. Sermons, on the other hand, were explicitly viewed as religious. Therefore, the reactions homeless people have to them can most clearly illustrate what happens when religion and social services mix.

REACTIONS TO SERMONS

Six respondents, roughly 20% of those interviewed, indicated having positive feelings toward sermons. These individuals related that religion was important in their daily lives:

> They sing and they have a small service. It's really always, a definitely good experience.

> I like them because they have a church service before you eat. . . . I get a lot out of it, they give a lot of testimonies, opens up your mind.

Therefore, listening to sermons helped reinforce the clients' already existing religious beliefs.

Four additional respondents were indifferent to sermons. They did not care one way or the other whether a sermon was present. In contrast, 64% of our respondents expressed negative feelings regarding sermons. Therefore, although about a third of the homeless interviewed either did not care about the presence of sermons or actively enjoyed them, a two-thirds majority reported disliking the sermon for a number of reasons.

Negative attitudes toward sermons at these establishments were framed in four primary ways: dislike of being forced to participate in religious activities; dislike of religious leaders, who they viewed as hypocrites; disagreement with the specific religious beliefs of the service providing congregations; and dislike of volunteers, who they perceived as condescending. Furthermore, respondents with negative attitudes toward sermons were likely to hold several of the above views simultaneously, often relating their dislike of sermons in overlapping terms.

Of the four ways homeless respondents described their dislike of sermons, by far, the most common was to refer to the religious elements present at congregation-run services as forced religion. The homeless men and women expressing these negative views felt that congregations, by preaching a sermon during services, were trying to make them religious or force them to adapt a particular form of religion.

Interviewer (I): What, if anything, did you not like about this place?
Respondent (R): The dislikes would be the forced sermonizing. That's probably it basically. Everything else is pretty reasonable.

As one homeless man succinctly put it, "they preach to you, try to force religion on you."

Even some respondents who identified themselves as religious people did not agree with the coercive aspect of having to attend a sermon to receive food. For many of the homeless respondents, this represented an affront to their ability to determine their own religious beliefs:

> Another place I ate in the last 5 days was Holy Life. They try to . . . it's good, I love God, I love the word, but you know, I don't like people forcing it on me before they feed me a meal.

This feeling of coercion accurately reflects what we observed about sermons at the congregations. At all six congregations, the sermons were held before the homeless could eat either their first or second servings. In either case, they were required to listen to the sermon to receive unrestricted access to the food.

Although perceiving the sermons as coercive was common, negative responses to sermons also took other forms. The second most common way that the homeless expressed dislike for sermons was to specifically blame the people who delivered the sermons for being either hypocrites or not real Christians. In general, respondents explained that the people who were preaching did not honor their own religious rules of good behavior and thus were in no position to instruct the homeless: "Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. . . . You have to follow their lead. You cannot disagree with them. It's just not Christian, but that's my opinion." This sense of hypocrisy was often coupled with feelings of coercion, as the next response details: "Well, you're in a position, you're in a place where everything is 'yes, yes' you know? . . . but yet I believe they're a bunch of hypocrites . . . and I just don't follow hypocrites." In this instance, sermons and their messages are rejected because those espousing religious beliefs are not viewed as sincere in their own religious practices.

A third objection to sermons revolved around the specific message or biblical interpretation that the congregations presented. Some of the homeless felt that the messages portrayed in the sermons did not match up with their own religious beliefs.

I: How did hearing the sermon make you feel?
R: Well, let's put it this way, I don't believe that people should keep preaching on something that happened years and years ago. You see that's not solving the problem.
I: What kind of stuff do they do that's religious?
R: Well, they, you know, dos and don'ts. God will send you to hell if you do this. Nope, I don't deal with that.

Thus, although some clients with strong preexisting religious beliefs felt that listening to sermons reinforced those beliefs, others recognized important differences between their views of Christianity and the views presented at the feeding establishments.

Finally, respondents also felt that another message was being transmitted through the sermons—that the homeless were below or less than the religious volunteers:

> It's how they do it cause they talk some good stuff, but when they start talking down to you, saying that you need to get God, that's ridiculous. It's what I call forced religion, they put you down, degrade you. We've done it, we've seen it, and we want to be left alone.

> The preacher, you know, whoever the spokesperson is, they think we're dumb, because you know we're homeless, you know, we're nobody, and they think that they need that to be implanted in us all the time.

Through these responses, we can begin to sense how the sermons lead clients to believe that volunteers think of the homeless as unworthy or as incapable human beings.

Although we have separated the reasons for disliking sermons into four interpretations—feelings of forced religion, identifying faith-based workers as hypocrites or not real Christians, an objection to the specific religious messages contained within sermons, and a view of workers as condescending—most often, respondents expressed two or three of these ideas at the same time. Thus, for two thirds of our respondents, the experience of religious elements during service delivery, at least inasmuch as those elements are represented by sermons, was not positive. When a religious element is perceived as coercive, hypocritical, or degrading, as our homeless respondents viewed sermon delivery, the reactions of clients are more likely to be negative. Therefore, adding religion to social service delivery under these circumstances may serve as an additional avenue for negative feelings among participants.

THE REPRODUCTION OF TWO PROBLEMS IN RESTORATIVE CONGREGATIONS

Our results indicate that religion, as currently employed in some congregations, generates negative feelings for the majority of the clients. This occurs regardless of the good intentions of the workers or volunteers in these settings. The homeless men and women we interviewed saw the religious element of the sermon in an overarching negative light. In these cases, instead of finding greater understanding or compassion, the clients find sermons that potentially recreate the same negative feelings that are experienced by clients of traditional social services. Why does the sermon often lead to feelings of antagonism and mistrust on the part of the homeless? Based on field notes and

interviews, we find that the same two mechanisms argued to produce tension in other service settings, ignoring the knowledge of clients and taking an individual view of client problems, are also present in religious settings.

IGNORING THE RELIGION OF THE HOMELESS

As the literature on interactions between clients and professional service providers illustrates, when the thoughts and ideas of the population that is being served are ignored, the client population tends to become resentful of the service workers (Abel, 1994; Gordon, 1988; Ladd-Taylor, 1986; Williams, 1996). This is an accurate description of what is occurring in situations where sermons are administered along with meals. When religious service workers do not take into account the religious beliefs of their homeless clients, a new area for tension is created. Our interviews with homeless clients strongly indicate that although many of the homeless have strong religious identities, they view their religious beliefs as private and as an inappropriate target for service providers. This conclusion is supported by evidence that strong negative feelings toward sermons are prevalent not just among the homeless who are not religious but also among those who identify themselves as religious.

We asked each participant about their religious views, including questions regarding whether they believe in God, attend religious services, pray, or read the Bible. The results show that the homeless, in general, are a religious population. Twenty individuals, or two thirds of our respondents, reported praying several times a week or, in some cases, all day. As one respondent stated when asked how often he prayed, "like about 24 hours a day." In fact, the homeless appeared to have religious beliefs similar to those of many mainstream Americans (Roof & McKinney, 1987). In addition to prayer being important to the homeless, 26 of the 30 respondents stated that they believe in God, 20 feel sure there is an afterlife, 23 believe in the second coming of Christ, and 11 of the clients reported reading the Bible several times a week. Finally, 13 respondents reported going to church at least a couple of times a month.

The homeless often expressed their religious beliefs in terms of religious individualism, with religion being something that they alone should be able to choose. For example,

> I'm not gonna have nobody tell me where I am in my life and how to deal with it. I mean there's been times where I've actually thanked God for my food just because I felt like I needed to. But that won't happen any quicker if someone's trying to jab it down my throat. That'll just keep me from coming.

One homeless man was actually very aware of these very personal religious views and differences among the homeless: "I just think it's funny. Because everybody has their own little interpretations." Holding a privatized view of

religion appears to be as common among the homeless as it is among the general American population (Baggett, 2000; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Roof & McKinney, 1987). Within this context of privatization, it is easy to discern how any sermon, regardless of its specific content, could be viewed as ignoring or conflicting with the homeless' previously held religious views.

This conclusion gains additional support from our finding that negative attitudes toward sermons are present in similar levels among the homeless with varying religious beliefs. Although generally religious, there were differences in degrees of religious belief among the homeless we interviewed. To examine the relationship between a respondent's religious beliefs and his or her feelings regarding sermons, we divided the sample into two groups. The first group consisted of the 18 (60%) respondents who scored above the sample mean on a religiosity scale.[4] Although the majority of our respondents fell into this group, 11 (37%) scored below the mean on the religiosity scale. Among those who reported having listened to a sermon, approximately two thirds of both the more religious (63%) and the less religious (66%) samples reported negative reactions to the presence of a sermon at a feeding establishment.

At first glance, this result is perhaps counterintuitive. It demonstrates, however, that integrating religion into service delivery fosters animosity not only from nonreligious clients but also from religious clients. This uniform aversion to sermons is a reflection of the homeless clients' view of religious beliefs as inhering within a private domain and the extent to which unsolicited preaching is viewed as ignoring or conflicting with this deeply held sentiment. Based on the results detailed above, it is apparent that one reason some people did not like the sermons is because they did not want to have religion, no matter what kind of religion, "pushed on them." This was true for people in both the more religious and less religious samples. They either do not want to learn about religion because they are committed to their own religious views or because they are committed to a secular outlook. Either way, the participants' beliefs are ignored. Disliking sermons is easy to understand in light of their prominence as an interaction between clients and service workers that actively ignores clients' thoughts about religion.

The homeless men and women in this study are expressing the same feelings about religious interactions with workers that participants in previous studies have expressed regarding workers in traditional social service environments. These results then highlight a potential flaw in the reasoning underlying arguments made by Charitable Choice supporters: that the inclusion of religion may not create a psychological benefit and a better service atmosphere (Colson & Pearcy, 1999; Loconte, 2004; Olasky, 1997). Through the four frames discussed earlier, the homeless are highlighting their sense of personal trespass in both religious and nonreligious terms. Even though congregations who feed the homeless, similar to most service providers, usually do

so with the best of intentions, if the feelings and beliefs of those they serve are not respected, negative feelings will arise.

THE INDIVIDUAL AS THE CAUSE OF HIS OR HER POVERTY

Although the sermons we observed varied greatly in length and content, there was one common theme present in nearly all of them: a tendency to blame the homeless for their problems. The thrust of the idea is that if the homeless would just get religion, they would not be homeless anymore. In 9 of the 12 sermons we observed, there were calls for the people to give their lives to Jesus and be saved; furthermore, it is argued that the Lord will provide not only spiritual but also material rewards for those following this call. Excerpts from six sermons at three of the congregations we attended clearly demonstrate this idea:

> I want you to realize the power you have to use Christ's name. . . . Call on him, ask in his name, and he will give to you and bless you. He will provide for you. [The pastor then introduced his wife to the group. She stood with him as he continued.] We believe. We asked God, and we've been blessed in material ways.

> Don't think that your prayers don't count. Don't think that God won't get involved in your situation personally. Don't think he won't get involved in your finances. Every time the Lord gets involved, who wins? Whoever's side the Lord is on.

These messages are relatively subtle when compared with the messages offered by some pastors. In fact, in two sermons we witnessed, believing in Jesus and being religious were linked with direct material rewards:

> One time, I needed a new roof, and I prayed to God that I would get money for that new roof. And you know what, do you know what happened to me when I asked Jesus for that new roof? Two weeks later, I went out to the mail box and there was a check for $10,000.

At a different congregation, the message was the same—If the homeless would simply believe, God would grant them what they need:

> I have always had Jesus in my life, and I have never been hungry. If you take Jesus into your life, you will not have to want for anything. God has granted me most of what I wanted.

> Like, I really needed some money, and then, all of a sudden in the mail, I would get a check from someone who owed me money from a long time

> ago that I had forgotten about. Just things like that—God taking care of your needs.

Thus, the message is that the source of the predicament in which homeless people find themselves must lie in some spiritual failing on their part. Given the appropriate religious commitment, the homeless too could experience the ease of living when God is on their side.

Additionally, these comments highlight the class differences between the homeless and their service providers, further generating a gap between clients and providers through the sermons. Indeed, sociologists of religion since Weber have observed that social class produces an elective affinity for certain types of religious expression (Niebuhr, 1929; Stark & Finke, 2000; Troeltsch, 1911/1981; Weber, 1922/1963). That class-generated differences in religious practices and ideas may detract from clients' assessments of the appeal of religious messages offered by serving congregations is worthy of further investigation.

During the course of our field research, there were several occasions in which service volunteers at some of the congregations privately expressed to us views of the homeless that contained the idea that the homeless caused their own problems. Some volunteers saw the homeless as people who were not to be trusted and as men and women who should be treated with a distinctly paternalistic attitude. This paternalistic attitude manifested itself most clearly during a discussion we had with the head volunteer regarding serving beverages to the homeless:

> Now, when you are serving them drinks, they are allowed to take one drink. . . . Open their sodas for them and pour them in the cups. Also be sure to monitor how much milk they take for their coffee. Some of these people are not very good at self-monitoring, so just watch them.

That same day, he expressed his perception that if the congregation could just provide religious enlightenment to the homeless, then their problems would end: "Our goal at the [nondenominational Christian Church] is to use this opportunity to help mainstream and humanize these people, and we want to show them that God can help them become productive and mainstream." This view that workers had to "humanize" the homeless instead of treating them as the human beings they already are was directly reflected in the sermons delivered at this facility as a prerequisite for receiving a second helping of food.

It is important to note that this perspective was not expressed uniformly by volunteers. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that those expressing this view might also support other efforts to aid homeless people through accomplishing structural change, such as demonstrating in favor of fair housing policies, although none were made known to us during the course of this research. It is particularly interesting to note that the people in power, specifically congregation and volunteer leaders, may be more likely to hold an individualistic view

of poverty (Reingold, 2001). One possible explanation for the prevalence of these attitudes among volunteer leaders is that many of them are professionals in their work lives and therefore bring with them the characteristics associated with professionals (Karl, 1998, p. 256; Stein, 1989, p. 246). We hypothesize that these approaches to treating homeless clients are transmitted to other workers who take cues from their congregation or volunteer leader.[5]

Observation of this attitude was not limited to the researchers. Homeless respondents also reported feeling that some volunteers find homeless people personally lacking in important aspects of their characters. One might expect, as advocates of faith-based initiatives have argued (Colson & Pearcy, 1999; Olasky, 1997), that encountering workers in congregations would lead to more trust and good feelings (Formicola et al., 2003). Instead, the homeless often expressed that congregation volunteers were no more compassionate or caring than social service workers at traditional institutions.

> I don't like the attitude, they make you all wait across the street and act like they're embarrassed that you'd be on their property. They feel like they're better.

> [The leader], he's a nice guy, but he's got an ego problem. And he makes sure we all knew he was [professional] of the year, and on and on it went. . . . It's like this 'holier than thou' attitude.

Those who reported disliking sermons were also more likely to offer negative comments about the volunteers working at those feeding establishments that make use of sermons. Sixty percent of the comments made about volunteers working at feeding establishments with sermons were negative, whereas only about 35% of the comments made about volunteers at other congregations were negative. This adds additional support to our argument that congregations incorporating sermons within their service delivery may be generating more negative client reactions.

Not all faith-based feeding organizations and their volunteers generate these negative reactions on the part of their homeless clients. We observed several examples of congregations engaged in service delivery strategies that did not foster negative feelings from clients. One in particular, the Food Truck, ranked highest among the homeless people we interviewed. Offering a number of reasons, each respondent who had visited the Food Truck ranked it as his or her favorite. First, the Food Truck met the homeless individuals' instrumental need for good food. Second, through their actions, either religious or otherwise, volunteers demonstrated respect for the autonomy of the homeless. Based on the reports of the homeless, these volunteers demonstrated the same qualities that research has shown are common among volunteers in positive service settings, such as recognizing clients' capacity to make their own decisions (Poppendieck, 1998). One way the volunteers demonstrated this was by making the food to order. More relevant to the current study, they

asked clients whether they would like to pray with them, acknowledging that the clients have both the ability and the right to make their own decisions. This implicit acknowledgment fostered positive feelings from clients toward volunteers: "He doesn't even dump it on you that he's a pastor or anything. . . . He doesn't drag you through the bushes with the holy routine."

The impact of this demonstration of respect was apparent in the respondents' evaluations of the Food Truck:

> They say, when you get your food they say "do you mind if we pray with you one on one?" And that's all they do. . . . They don't downgrade us for being homeless.

> The people there, they all seem to enjoy what they're doing. They all seem like it's not for brownie points [with God], but they're feeling good about what they're doing. Doesn't make us feel ashamed to eat their food.

Because there was no sermon at the Food Truck and religious participation was voluntary in nature, feelings of religious coercion and animosity were not evoked. Therefore, an atmosphere was created in which interactions between workers and clients were characterized by goodwill on both sides.

CONCLUSION

Our findings indicate that there are a number of different religious elements that may be incorporated into service provision by congregations. Sermons are used by congregations as opportunities to convey specific religious teachings aimed at repairing the perceived spiritual malaise of the homeless. Regardless of their religious beliefs, about two thirds of our homeless respondents reacted negatively to these sermons, characterizing them as coercive, hypocritical, condescending, and conflicting with their preexisting beliefs. The content of the sermons and the manner in which they are delivered display two tendencies common in secular service settings: ignoring the local knowledge and experience of clients and identifying the individual as responsible for his or her own troubles.

Although our data do suggest that the addition of religion, at least when it is employed in a coercive manner, may not be the panacea the supporters of Charitable Choice had proposed, there are several avenues of research that remain to be pursued prior to drawing definitive conclusions about the transformative value of faith-based social services. First, because there were no liberal or mainline congregations for us to observe, focusing on how religion is employed in these settings, as well as client reactions to these services, would be beneficial. Second, further research should focus on how clients feel about the religious elements encountered at other types of services, especially

services in which volunteers and clients have prolonged contact, such as job-training and mentoring services. Finally, interviewing a larger sample, or a sample based on a different client base, would also aid in the generalization of these findings, which are based on the reactions of a relatively small number of homeless service recipients.

Although new research is likely to shed additional light on these unexplored issues, we find that certain congregations may generate an additional avenue for mistrust and suspicion through ignoring the religious convictions of the homeless and delivering sermons that actively point to spiritual flaws as a source of poverty. This undesirable consequence can occur regardless of the religiosity of the clients. The initiators of Charitable Choice have proposed that the delivery of services by religious providers should lead to greater compassion and understanding between workers and clients, therefore increasing effectiveness in alleviating the plight of the homeless and poor (Loconte, 2004; Olasky, 1997). We find that when the homeless arrive in search of a meal, some congregations do see this as a time to help their clients through sharing their interpretation of the word of God. For some clients, this practice is comforting; however, for most, it is viewed in a negative light. Rather than serving as an avenue of personal transformation, sermons may create additional barriers between volunteers and those they are trying to help.

Notes

1. There are no liberal or mainline Protestant congregations that operate feeding establishments in our city. However, certain congregations do provide teams of volunteers to run dinners at one of the establishments on which the homeless reported.

2. We spoke with several area researchers and homeless advocates to identify the different locations where homeless men and women spent time during the day.

3. A table comparing the demographic characteristics of a citywide census of the homeless to those of the homeless in our sample is available from the authors.

4. We read each respondent a total of 10 statements regarding their religious beliefs (i.e., belief in God, Jesus, Biblical literalism) and practices (i.e., church attendance, prayer, reading of sacred texts) with which they were able to agree or disagree. These items were combined into a scale on which respondents were given a point for each statement with which they agreed, producing a range of scores from 0 to 11. Respondents were placed into a more religious group if they scored above the mean score on this scale or a less religious group if they scored below the mean.

5. We did witness one incident where a worker actively fought against the congregation leader's policies toward the homeless. We inquired as to the whereabouts of this worker after his absence at two consecutive meal services and were told that he been asked not to return.

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