

Private Food Assistance

Can Religious Congregations Satisfy Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Justice? An Assessment of Faith-based Food Assistance Programs in Rural Mississippi

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In the wake of welfare reform, many States have considered utilizing local religious communities as a point of social service delivery for relief previously offered through State entitlement programs. “Charitable Choice,” Section 104 of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, forbids States that contract for social services with local voluntary associations from discriminating against faith-based organizations seeking to provide such services. In this study, Bartkowski and Regis examine the current food assistance strategies of a heterogeneous sample of religious communities in Mississippi’s Golden Triangle Region. Their study situates rural Mississippi’s faith-based food assistance efforts within the broader context of congregational poverty relief programs. Where appropriate, they draw comparisons between faith-based food assistance and the service delivery mechanisms utilized in public assistance programs.

The authors investigate the social processes underlying faith-based food assistance through their analysis of over 600 pages of transcribed indepth interviews. These data, collected from 1997 to 1999, were culled from

religious leaders representing 30 local congregations in rural northeast Mississippi. The authors also conducted observational research at a subsample of four religious congregations and tracked various para-church food assistance and relief efforts on the local scene. They set the context for the qualitative investigation by providing an overview of Charitable Choice legislation and a summary snapshot of social life in rural Mississippi. They then analyze four key organizational strategies through which rural Mississippi congregations provide food assistance to food-insecure populations. These congregational relief strategies include:

- ✱ *intensive food assistance*, entailing sustained interpersonal contact between congregants and local needy populations (e.g., highly active onsite food pantries, particularly those complemented by a hot meal program);
- ✱ *intermittent direct food assistance*, consisting of congregational programs that foster periodic contact between churchgoers and the hungry (e.g., holiday food baskets);
- ✱ *para-church food initiatives*, involving collaboration among local congregations (e.g., food provided through interfaith relief agencies); and
- ✱ *distant missions of food provision*, where local congregations sponsor group mission trips to severely disadvantaged areas of a State, a region, or another country (e.g., weeklong food provision and poverty relief undertaken in the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, or Central America).

The authors focus on the distinguishing features of food assistance strategies and the congregational contexts in which they are used. They also highlight congregational motivations for adopting particular food relief strategies, and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each, as follows:

Intensive food relief, which places the provider and recipient of relief in a sustained relationship with one another, often challenges social barriers (e.g., racial divisions and class-based hierarchies). However, intensive food relief requires a considerable investment of time and resources, leading some congregations to prefer *intermittent direct food assistance*. Given its more bounded timeframe, intermittent direct food assistance can provide short-term relief from episodic

food insecurity. However, this kind of assistance does not facilitate the same enduring social bonds as intensive engagement with the poor. *Para-church* collaborations can provide food assistance efficiently (i.e., in a centralized fashion) to local disadvantaged populations—particularly those facing short-term food insecurity. Yet if they operate as liaison organizations, para-church agencies can reinforce social distance between local congregants and the poor. *Distant missions of food provision* give congregants direct exposure to poverty and hunger and personalize poverty. However, given their emphasis on geographical travel and short-term spiritual pilgrimage, distant missions do not guarantee a transposition of social action into one's home community.

The authors argue that if religious communities are to become more involved in local food assistance efforts,

it is imperative that policymakers understand the range of food assistance strategies that congregations have chosen and the social context in which such programs are undertaken. Government officials and community development specialists should also be aware of the cultural meanings that religious communities invest in food and of the organizational motivation behind the particular food assistance strategies they adopt. Bartkowski and Regis conclude that religious communities can be a valuable ally in society's effort to redress food insecurity. At the same time, they urge that faith-based food assistance initiatives implemented under Charitable Choice be structured with an awareness of the opportunities and the limitations likely to accompany such programs.