Mark W. Wendorf

JUSTICE OR CHARITY?--
A Reflection*

Many faith communities struggle with
what kind of mission they will provide
in their communities.

Will it be service oriented,
or will it confront systems?
Will it help individuals
or will it try to create community change?

Biblically,
it is a question of
charity versus justice.

By definition
there is a difference between charity and justice.
Charity is giving help to the needy.
Justice is making things right,
    making things equal so the need no longer exists.

According to Walter Brueggemann,
"Justice is sorting out what belongs to whom
and returning it to them"

*(To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly
Brueggemann, Parks, Groome)*

Charity,
or that which is often called
the ministry of social services,

*The Rev. Mark W. Wendorf is a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and Assistant Professor of Urban Ministry at McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago. Address: 5555 S. Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637-1692, USA. E-mail: mwendorf@mccormick.edu.

Mission Studies, Vol. XVI, 1-2, 2000
helps *individuals* and their personal needs.
Charity focuses on the individual.
    If you are hungry you are fed.
    If you are naked you are clothed.
    If you are sick you are healed.
    If you are imprisoned you are visited.
    If you are oppressed you are counseled.

Charity is often based on the assumption,
and the theological understanding,
that one's poverty,
one's neediness,

is the responsibility only of the individual.
    For example,
    You are poor because you are lazy.
    You are naked because you spent unwisely.
    You are in jail because you acted immorally.
    You are hungry because you did not plan well.
    You are in need because you are a sinner.
    Repent and be saved.

Charity hears the individual's cry
and answers the individual's need.
The misery, for the time being, is healed.
The need, for the time being, is filled.
The hunger, for the moment, is fed.
The thirst, for now, is slaked.
The nakedness, today, is covered.

Charity is also based on the assumption
that bad times are an irregular blip on the screen of life.
    It is just the dip in the road
    and these bad times will eventually pass;
    for bad times don't last forever.

Charity is based on the assumption
that people are *momentarily* facing a rough time
and once that moment passes,
once they plan well,