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SERVICE PEDDLERS VERSUS COMMUNITY BUILDERS

by John McKnight

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 nonhearing alike, spoke a unique sign language brought from England when they immigrated to Massachusetts in 1690. In the mid-twentieth century with increased mobility, 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 nonhearing people to that of the hearing people.

She found that 80 percent of the nonhearing people graduated from high school, as did 80 percent of the hearing. She found that

about 90 percent of the nonhearing 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 nonhearing people. There she found that 50 percent of nonhearing people graduated from high school compared to 75 percent of the hearing. Nonhearing people married half the time, while hearing people married 90 percent of the time. Forty percent of the nonhearing people had children, while 80 percent of the hearing people did. And nonhearing people had fewer children. They

also received about one-third of the income of the hearing people. And their range of occupations was much more limited.

How was it, Groce wondered, that on an island with no services, nonhearing people were as much like hearing people as you could possibly measure? Yet thirty miles away, with the most advanced services available, nonhearing 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 the deaf people. In that community, all the people adapted by signing, rather than handing the nonhearing people over to professionals and their services. That community on Martha's Vineyard wasn't just doing what was necessary to help or to serve one group. It was doing what was necessary to incorporate everyone into the life of that community.

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 dispensing of services for the only thing that will make people whole—community? Are they service peddlers or community builders? 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 as 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" (John 15:12-15). It is not enough to be a servant. 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.

I 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, the county which includes Chicago, Illinois. In 1986, it added up to about \$6,300 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's the equivalent of \$25,000. At the time the median income in Cook County was about that much.

So then 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're 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 real problem. (Bureaucracy eats only about 6 percent.) The money basically goes to health-and-human-service professionals: nurses, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, public-housing administrators, land-clearance officials, and welfare workers. It doesn't go to poor people.

2 The second problem is that the service system is full of inefficiencies." I fight the system and before people come to me—against the system—become neighborhood

I was organizing neighborhoods. I was organizing people responded. They were saying when I call neighbors to solve antipoverty programs organizing

The antipoverty program to interview people we're from such-and-such a neighborhood. Can you tell me about your school?"

She looks down and says, "I just got through the clipboard. They write on the clipboard years." They don't know years," but "drop the clipboard."

Then they say, "This is to me."

She looks at it, and says, "Read."

"Illiterate," they say. "Just now you squint and have trouble seeing."

"Yes, I think I read."

"Visual deficit," they say. "Any children?"

"Three daughters and the eighteen-year-old."

"Teenage pregnancy clipboard."

Then they say, "Give me some help. Just write the service center here. We need inventory for the center and three people for an illiteracy program for a neighborhood."

2 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 the 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 when I called them to join with their neighbors to solve local problems. Then the antipoverty program came, and within three years organizing became incredibly difficult.

The antipoverty 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 the tenth grade." So they write on the clipboard, "Dropout. Two years." They don't write "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 the eighteen-year-old has a child."

"Teenage pregnancy," then 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 respon-

sive to the community, and for a new teenage-pregnancy counseling program that gets the schools more money.

This poor woman is a gold mine. But she gets no gold to overcome her poverty.

When in my community organizing work I went to this woman, I said, "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 begin 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 from the service center to fix the neighborhood."

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 dropout, illiterate, bad-eyed, teenage-pregnant women like Mrs. Jones. If the church is about community—not service—then it's about capacity, not deficiency.

3 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 people in the white coats with the clipboards to come and save you." The proliferation of an ideol-

ogy 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 who they represent, but they refer people to the 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 ministers of Christian community.

Here are five rules to protect yourself from being the agent of the devil in the middle of a church.

1) Saul Alinsky referred to the first rule as the "iron rule": **Don't do for others what they can do for themselves.** Don't be a servant, be a friend. Dependency is cozy. Equality is difficult.

2) **Find another's gifts, skills, and capacities.** Support them. Give them a place in the community.

3) **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's a point when professionals can end their services and be useful. A good professional model is the dentist. No one uses a dentist unless they have to. And we can understand what the dentist does. Therefore, the dentist doesn't delude us into thinking we're receiving "care" with a drill, nor does the dentist mystify the work.

Another good model for professionals is the airline pilot. This highly-trained person will suffer the same fate as the clients. This assures that we will receive the highest quality service.

4) This rule is a sort of subpoint 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 will at least have a choice as to who will serve them. Then there may be some competition, responsiveness, and accountability.

5) **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' followers 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 treated as an equal.

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 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 took hospitality out of the community. The "hospice" became a "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 United Way. You will have to fight the social services. They have made a market of the temple. And you know what you're supposed to do then. Get 'em out! Or

bring into the church the hospitality that sees relationships as friendships, not as provider-client transactions. A church's response to people in need should not simply be to provide services, but to practice hospitality, offering—and receiving—the gift of community.

JOHN MCKNIGHT is the Director of Community Studies of the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois). This article, originally published in 1989, was adapted with permission from *The Other Side*, 300 W. Apsley, Philadelphia, PA 19144. Subscriptions \$29.50 per year.

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